Auf Wiedersehen, Sweetheart

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Auf Wiedersehen, Sweetheart

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Summary

WW2 AU. Feliciano Vargas is a passionate, if slightly scared, Italian resistance member. Falling in love with a German fighter pilot was the last thing he expected... and it will test his national loyalty, and his heart, to their limits.

(reposted from ff.net after the unfortunate deletion of George deValier's account in August 2019, with original formatting/italicisation!)

Notes

I claim no ownership of this fic whatsoever! It was written by George deValier, and Hetalia of course belongs to Hidekaz Himaruya. I mean, this fic stole my heart, but I'm not trying to steal anything.

All the author notes following this are the original ones by George deValier. They are there in order to preserve as much as possible of the original. I'm not trying to masquerade as him in any way shape or form! George, and Auf Wiedersehen Sweetheart in particular, literally inspired me to write, and showed me the emotional impact stories can have, so nothing but respect for this dude <3

Anyway, enjoy the fic!

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Pairing: Ludwig Beilschmidt/Feliciano Vargas (Germany/Italy)

Summary: AU. Italy, WW2. Feliciano Vargas is a passionate, if slightly scared, Italian resistance member. Falling in love with a German fighter pilot was the last thing he expected... and it will test his national loyalty, and his heart, to their limits.

This is a companion story to my US/UK fic, "We'll Meet Again." It tells Feliciano and Ludwig's story of events. You do not need to have read that story to understand this one, however.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano did not know what else to do. Couldn't this shouting officer see that he obviously didn't speak German? Feliciano tried again, waving his little white flag even faster. He always carried it for these sorts of situations, but today it did not seem to be working.

"I don't understand you! *Kein Deutsch!* I really would like to answer you but I have no idea what you're saying! *Sprechen sie Italienisch? Englisch*?"

This did not work either. The German just yelled louder. Feliciano cringed under the verbal assault and tried to shrink even smaller. This was completely unfair! All he'd wanted to do was walk to the village market to buy flour, and he'd been stopped on the road by this loud German soldier who seemed incredibly angry about something and wouldn't stop yelling at him in the unfamiliar language. Feliciano was used to seeing the Germans in and around the village by now, but he had never had to deal with something like this before. He was terrified.

"I'm sorry!" cried Feliciano as the German grew even angrier, his voice rising to a deafening volume. "I don't know what you…" Feliciano's heart stopped in his chest when the German pulled his gun from its holster. The entire street and surrounding fields seemed to turn on their side. But the soldier didn't point the weapon – instead he lifted it above his head and Feliciano watched as the butt of the gun moved swiftly towards him. He closed his eyes and braced for the impact. It didn't come. Instead, the sound of another German speaking reached his ears and Feliciano risked opening an eye and peeking upwards.

This new German was tall, big, blond, and spoke angrily to the soldier, whose arm he held in a firm grip. He seemed to have come from nowhere. Feliciano watched, wide-eyed, as the blond officer spoke a few more angry words before releasing the soldier and dismissing him curtly. The soldier saluted hastily and hurried away. Feliciano grasped his white flag, took a deep breath, and waited edgily to see what would happen next. The officer looked down at him and started to speak in German, but broke off. After a few tense moments, he asked, "I don't suppose you speak English?"

Feliciano breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness! Yes, I speak English! That soldier, he kept yelling at me, and I didn't know what he wanted, and he was really loud and angry and scary and thank you so much for stopping him from hitting me, and are you going to arrest me?"

The German looked a little dazed. "You're welcome. No, I am not going to arrest you."

"Oh, good!" Feliciano smiled and the officer paused before continuing.

"I am sorry about him. He wanted to see your identification papers."

"Oh," said Feliciano, scrambling to retrieve the papers from his back pocket. "I have them here, I…"

"No…" The German held up his hands, palms outward. "It is fine, really. Are you... are you all right?"

Feliciano smiled again. This was the nicest German soldier he had ever encountered, even if he was very stern looking and he didn't smile. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

The German nodded perfunctorily. "You're welcome," he said again. Feliciano waited but the German didn't continue and just looked down at him intently. Feliciano felt his breath come faster as he stared back. It almost felt like the German was looking right through him. His eyes were the bluest thing Feliciano had ever seen.

"So…" said Feliciano finally, feeling like he was breaking a spell in speaking. "Can I keep going to the market now? Because I am supposed to buy flour and I'm already late and I don't want my Grandpa to get worried."

The German blinked a few times and his eyes finally flicked up to look past Feliciano. "Please." He gestured for Feliciano to walk past.

"Thank you, nice German soldier man!" Feliciano ran past, continuing down the narrow country road towards the village. After a few steps, unsure why, he turned to look back. The German was watching after him, but he quickly turned away.

Feliciano decided it must be his lucky day. After the incident with the German soldiers, he managed to find plenty of flour to buy at the market, plus apples and even a tiny bit of sugar, which had been almost impossible to find since the start of the war. Feliciano ran cheerfully out of the village, waving to the locals as he went, and headed back down the narrow dirt road to his little farmhouse. The late afternoon sun bathed the street, the trees, and the wide open fields in a warm orange glow, and Feliciano hummed happily to himself as he swung his basket of groceries at his side.

He loved the countryside on days like this. He could almost forget the constant German presence in the village, almost not hear the sound of bombs exploding in echoes off the mountains, almost let his eyes skim over the sight of a broken down and burnt out tank on the side of the road. It was almost peaceful. As he walked, Feliciano wondered what had made the German officer stop the soldier from hitting him earlier. Feliciano had not had much to do with the Germans, trying desperately to avoid them, but his Grandpa and brother always told him that they were all horrible and nasty and evil. That officer certainly hadn't seemed horrible or evil at all. Feliciano couldn't help wondering if he would ever see him again. But he shouldn't think that. He shouldn't care. So why on earth did he?

Feliciano turned into the lane that led to his front door and was immediately greeted by the sounds of laughter and singing. He smiled and ran up to the house. As he walked into the crowded front room he was greeted by cheers. Lovino stood on a table in the centre of the room, playing his guitar and leading the crowd in a rousing revolutionary song. Feliciano laughed… Lovino must be very drunk already. The room was not large, and seemed even smaller when it was full of celebrating revolutionaries. Grandpa Roma crossed the room and

took the basket from Feliciano before replacing it with a bottle of wine and pulling him into a hug. "Welcome home, Feliciano! Oh, you got apples and sugar, good boy!"

"Grandpa, what's going on?" asked Feliciano, wondering what the crowd could be celebrating this evening.

"Today is a good day for a free Italy!"

Feliciano knew what that meant. He'd heard it enough times by now. "What was the prize today?"

"A shipment of ammunition coming out of the mountains." Roma turned and yelled to the room, "That's one load of bullets the Germans won't be firing!"

The room erupted in cheers once again. Feliciano applauded with them, but this time his heart wasn't quite in it. "Were there many of you? Is everyone all right?"

"The losses were all to the Germans today." Roma grasped Feliciano's hand and raised it along with the wine bottle in a salute. He took a deep sip before finally releasing Feliciano's hand. "Three drivers, seven guards. Your old Grandpa took down three of them single-handedly!"

"Well done Grandpa!" Feliciano took a swig of the wine and tried to think through the loud singing and talking and cheering of the roomful of revolutionaries. He never used to think about it. Grandpa always said that the only good German soldier was a dead German soldier. But Feliciano suddenly thought, those soldiers who had been killed could have been just like the German he had met on the road today. It was strange... Grandpa had told him plenty of times about soldiers he had killed and Feliciano hadn't given it a second thought. But now that evil German he had been taught to hate had a face. A face with eyes as blue as the sky…

"So drink, Feli, and celebrate another victory for La Resistenza!"

The loud and excited resistance members cheered again. Feliciano knew all of them... villagers and farmers who opposed the German military presence in Italy and had joined forces to fight against them and sabotage their operations. They often met in the Vargas farmstead or a small cantina in the village, usually to plan a mission or to celebrate one accomplished. They were La Resistenza… the Italian resistance… and they were currently among the most wanted people in Italy. Stopping German supplies, bombing cars and tanks, gathering important tactical information; La Resistenza worked tirelessly to sabotage the efforts of the German military in Italy. And when they celebrated, it was with the same passion and thoroughness.

Lovino finished the chorus of the song, jumped down from the table and threw an arm around Feliciano. "Hey Feli!" Feliciano was right… Lovino certainly had drunk too much wine already. He was only ever this happy and sociable after a few drinks and a decisive victory.

"You weren't involved in the operation today, were you?" asked Feliciano, suddenly concerned. It was bad enough that Grandpa always went out and put himself in such risk and danger. He did not want to have to worry about his brother as well.

Lovino rolled his eyes. "If only." Lovino turned to Roma. "When are you going to let me go out with you on a real mission, Grandpa? I'm sick of just planting bombs in cars. I want to see a little more action!" Roma just laughed and threw his free arm around Lovino.

"You know I don't like to see my beloved grandsons in danger," said Roma, hugging both Feliciano and Lovino close.

Feliciano laughed. Grandpa did not need to worry about him. He was the first to admit that he tried to stay far away from danger at all times. He still contributed to the movement, usually by acquiring what information he could from the local villagers about German movements in the area. Feliciano was grateful that Grandpa Roma tried to keep him safe, but at the same time was aware that sometimes he was still treated as though he was a little child. Lovino on the other hand had been desperate to get out and into the action for years, even though Grandpa kept telling him that the purpose of the Resistance was to be seen as little as possible and that face to face conflicts were rare. But with every small increase in responsibility Grandpa allowed Lovino, he only ever wanted more.

"Next time, Lovino, I promise you," said Roma, smiling cheerfully and ruffling Lovino's hair.

"You always say that," grumbled Lovino, knocking Roma's hand away.

Roma just laughed and took the guitar from Lovino's hands. "Cheer up, Lovino. Celebrate and sing with us!" Roma strummed the guitar, turned and bowed to the room, and started playing an immediately recognisable melody. The crowded room erupted into cheers of appreciation. Then Roma burst into a song that was by now so familiar to them all.

"Una mattina mi son svegliato,
O bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! Bella, ciao, ciao, ciao!
Una mattina mi son svegliato,
e ho trovato l'invasor."

The revolutionaries joined in. Lovino, drunk on wine and exhilaration, seemed to immediately forget his annoyance and started dancing with one of the local girls. Feliciano couldn't help being carried away. He drunk wine from the bottle and joined in the singing. He greeted various people cheerfully when they walked over to speak to him. He laughed and celebrated and listened to tales of victories then shouted loudly along with everyone for Grandpa Roma to play the song again. He danced and cheered and sung the song over and over until the final verse which everyone sung so loudly Feliciano was sure they would be heard even in the village.

"È questo il fiore del partigiano,
O bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! Bella, ciao, ciao, ciao!
È questo il fiore del partigiano,
morto per la libertà!"

That night, exhausted, full, and happy, Feliciano lay trying to sleep with Lovino's snores coming from the bed beside his. He'd spent the night eating, drinking, talking, and singing songs of Italian freedom with the local resistance. But as he closed his eyes and contentedly

drifted off to sleep, the last image to drift through his head was that of a blond haired, blue eyed German officer, standing in the sunlight and looking down at him.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics are from the WW2 Italian partisan song "Bella Ciao": (YouTube) /watch?v=MQtgsuIM96I

One morning I awakened
Oh bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! Bella, ciao, ciao, ciao!
One morning I awakened
And I found the invader.

This is the flower of the partisan
Oh bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! Bella, ciao, ciao, ciao!
This is the flower of the partisan
Who died for freedom.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano walked to the market every afternoon. It was his favourite time of the day. His Grandpa always told him to walk straight, look at the ground, don't dawdle, speak to no one, hurry back. But Feliciano enjoyed his afternoon walk. He loved to walk through the fields and pick flowers. He loved to chat with the villagers and give the flowers to pretty girls. He loved to run down the dusty country roads, racing the local children. And when the day was done he loved nothing more than to sit under his favourite oak tree, a few fields over from his house, and just watch the clouds float past in the orange sky. It was as he was nearing the tree, basket in hand and headed to the market, that he noticed the outline of a German soldier walking slowly in the distance. His stomach twisted in knots and he held tight to his white flag, but as he approached closer he recognised the soldier as the one who had helped him in the street the day before. His stomach suddenly twisted for an entirely different reason.

"*Buon pomeriggio,* German!"

The German looked over at Feliciano and raised his eyebrows. He tilted his head slightly in recognition. "*Buon pomeriggio,* Italian."

Feliciano felt a little jump in his chest. He knew he should not be greeting German soldiers, but he couldn't help but feel that this German was a kind man. He must be - Feliciano did not feel afraid of him like he did all the others. "What brings you to this beautiful part of Italy? Well, not the country as a whole, I know what brings you here. So I suppose I mean, what brings you to this field? I've never seen a German soldier so far outside of town before."

The German took a moment to respond. "I had the sudden urge to take a walk."

Feliciano nodded in understanding. "That happens to me too sometimes. Did you eat too much pasta?"

The German blinked a few times and furrowed his brow. "No."

"See, I usually go for a walk after a really big meal. Then I fall asleep under this big oak tree here. And then Lovino wakes me up and gets mad at me. Lovino is my big brother. Do you have a big brother?"

The German looked like he was having trouble following the conversation, though Feliciano couldn't see why - he seemed to speak English perfectly. "Yes, I do."

"What is your big brother's name?"

"Gilbert."

"What is your name?"

"Ludwig. I mean, Lieutenant Beilschmidt."

"Pleased to meet you Ludwig, my name is Feliciano. Feliciano Vargas. Thank you again for stopping that angry man from hitting me yesterday. I'm going to the market to see if there are tomatoes for sale, would you like to walk with me?"

"…Yes," said Ludwig slowly, although he didn't look like he was sure. "I am just heading back that way now." Feliciano felt a happy warmth settle in his stomach as Ludwig fell into step beside him and they walked slowly together through the field. Feliciano had to stifle a laugh in thinking about what Grandpa Roma and Lovino would have to say about this… walking to the village with a German soldier! They walked in silence for a few moments as Feliciano took the time to study the German properly. Ludwig's grey uniform was slightly different to the ones Feliciano was used to seeing, but he recognised it immediately as an officer's. His eyes strayed to the line of decorations on Ludwig's chest, then further, and he could not help noticing that the muscles in Ludwig's arms bulged against the fabric. Feliciano bit his lip and he had to tell himself to look away, feeling a little confused. He quickly shook the feeling away. He breathed the fresh air deeply and swung his empty basket happily, surprised at how comfortable it felt just walking beside this German. He already felt disappointed that once they reached the village he would probably never see Ludwig again. But that was only to be expected.

Ludwig did not seem the talkative type, but Feliciano didn't mind carrying the conversation. He was enjoying the chance to speak in English. "Oh look! The lavender is still blooming! That means it's going to be a short winter, do you know, which is good, because winter is cold and I don't like the cold, or the snow, or the rain really, unless it just happens sometimes and I am inside by the fire. What is the winter like in Germany? Does it rain a lot? I hear that in England, it rains nearly all year 'round. Can you imagine! You would never be able to go outside! I think I would be so bored, don't you? Ludwig, what is the German word for rain?" Feliciano looked up to find Ludwig staring down at him with an unreadable expression on his face. Feliciano smiled and Ludwig quickly looked down at his feet.

"It is *Regen.*" When Ludwig spoke his voice was deep and accented.

"*Regen*," repeated Feliciano. The word felt strong in his mouth. "In Italian it is *pioggia*. Do you know, I would like to learn German one day." Something clicked in his mind and his chest flipped. He'd just stumbled on the perfect way to see Ludwig again. "Oh, Ludwig, I have a brilliant idea! You can teach me German and I will teach you Italian! What do you think of that?"

"I…" Ludwig looked at a loss again. Feliciano got the sense that he was not used to the feeling. "I do not even know you."

"Of course you do, we're talking, aren't we? Doesn't that make us friends?"

"Friends…" Ludwig seemed to trip over the word. He shook his head. "You are a very strange man. Why do you suddenly think we are friends? I am a stranger in your country."

Feliciano laughed. "Stranger? You're not a stranger, Ludwig, we've met now! And you seem like a very nice person, after all, you did help me when you didn't have to and you're going to

teach me German and you have kind eyes. Are you stationed nearby?"

Ludwig was slow to answer. "Yes, but I can not tell you where."

Feliciano smiled. He'd expected as much. Ludwig was obviously not stupid enough to give away such information to someone he had just met. "That is fine. You can't be too far away though, and that means we can see each other every day, yes? And you can teach me German, and I can teach you Italian, and I am sure that we will become very good friends. You can find me by the big oak tree most days. If I'm asleep, though, make sure you wake me slowly, because I can get very cranky when I'm woken up, but that doesn't stop Lovino from doing it all the time. Big brothers can be very annoying, can't they."

Ludwig made a noise which was almost a laugh. "Yes, I agree with you about that," he said as they walked out of the field and onto the dirt road which led to the village.

Feliciano clutched his basket, feeling deliriously happy with every small thing he learnt about Ludwig. Feliciano was practically an expert at acquiring information before the informant even realised they had given it. He sometimes used the skill for the cause of the Resistance; but it was much nicer to find things out just because he was interested. "Is your brother a soldier like you?"

Ludwig spoke concisely and firmly. "My brother is at the Russian front, and he is a soldier. I, however, am not."

Feliciano looked up at Ludwig quizzically. "Not a soldier?"

"No," said Ludwig, his lips turning up slightly, "I am a pilot."

Feliciano's eyes widened. "A pilot? I've never met a pilot before. Do you deliver supplies, that sort of thing?"

"No. I am a fighter pilot."

Feliciano tried not to make an embarrassing noise of excitement. A fighter pilot… it sounded like something out of an adventure novel. Something completely different to everything he knew. Something new. "That's amazing! Is it difficult? Is it scary? Do you have to wear those funny hats? Have you fought against the English?" Feliciano immediately regretted the last question.

Ludwig took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, still staring straight ahead. "To me, it is not difficult. It is not scary. We wear the required headgear. And yes, I fight the English. Every day."

"Every day?" It seemed inconceivable.

"Of course. After our failure in the *Luftschlacht um England…"* Ludwig did not finish the sentence. "I just wish to do the best I can for my country."

Feliciano quickly realised he did not want to stay on this subject. He immediately changed it. As they continued walking and talking, Feliciano was surprised by just how much they

actually had in common. Ludwig also had an older brother and had been raised by their grandfather, who had taught him English as a child. He liked animals as well, but he preferred dogs while Feliciano had always loved cats. He was also from a small village and loved the countryside. Feliciano discovered that they both loved soccer and Ludwig had even played it at near national level before the war. And when he didn't think Feliciano was looking Ludwig would almost smile and Feliciano could feel his heart skip a beat. In all the afternoons of all the years that Feliciano had spent walking to the market, this was the best.

They walked slowly but eventually they reached the village and headed down its narrow paved streets towards the market. Stone and wooden buildings closed in on all sides, throwing shadows onto the cobblestones. After a few moments of silence Feliciano looked over at Ludwig to find that he was studying him intently. He felt himself turn red. "What is it?"

"How old are you?" asked Ludwig curiously.

"Nineteen, why?"

"Are you healthy?"

Feliciano paused for a moment. What a strange question. "I think so. The other day I got a splinter in my finger while I was helping Grandpa with the firewood and Lovino got it out with a needle and then he said that sometimes people get sick and die from tiny things like splinters but I feel fine so far… have you ever heard of anyone dying from a splinter?"

"Er…"

"Oh, and I had a fever last summer - it didn't last long though, but other than that yes I am quite healthy thank you." Feliciano waited for Ludwig to continue, but he didn't. He searched for the polite thing to say. "And you… are you healthy?" It was a strange topic of conversation, but who knew what they talked about in Germany.

"What? Yes, I…" Ludwig paused, then shook his head briskly. "*Nein*! What I mean is… if you are of the right age and healthy, why aren't you in the army?"

"Oh." Feliciano shrugged. "I don't want to fight."

"But your country is at war!" Ludwig's voice was louder and firmer than Feliciano had yet heard it, but he just shrugged again.

"Their war, not mine. I don't want to hurt anybody. What did the English ever do to me? English people seem really nice. They wear suits and drink tea and know lots about poetry. I don't want to kill people like that. We shouldn't kill people who know lots about poetry."

"It is the duty of all young men to fight for their country in wartime." Ludwig said it like he was reciting a script.

"Is that why you do it? Because it is your duty?" Feliciano was genuinely curious.

At this Ludwig paused. He took a few deep breaths, like he was thinking. He finally replied, "I love my country."

"What if your country is fighting for the wrong reasons. Did you ever think of that?"

A spasm of pain seemed to pass over Ludwig's face. He blinked it away. "It is not my place to question what my country fights for."

"Yes it is."

Ludwig looked stunned. By now they had reached the market, emerging from the narrow overshadowed streets into the wide open town square. The villagers drew away from them with suspicious and worried looks at the German officer. Feliciano ignored them and headed straight for the stalls where he could see rows of bright vegetables.

"Oh look Ludwig, they have tomatoes after all… Lovino will be so happy!"

When the stall owner glared at them, somehow looking both angry and terrified, Ludwig discreetly touched Feliciano's elbow and said softly, "I will take my leave now."

"Oh," said Feliciano, feeling disappointed. "All right then. But, you will meet me tomorrow afternoon by the oak tree, won't you? For our language lesson?"

"Yes." Feliciano was surprised by how fast Ludwig responded. "Yes, I will."

"Oh good! *Ciao*!" Feliciano immediately reached out to stop Ludwig as he turned to leave. "Wait, Ludwig, how do you say 'goodbye' in German?"

Ludwig paused, turned, and looked down at Feliciano. "*Auf wiedersehen,* Feliciano." Then he strode off through the surrounding crowd, who parted nervously as he passed. Feliciano waved a goodbye before turning back to the stall owner. The man regarded him suspiciously, though Feliciano was fairly sure he couldn't have understood their words in English.

"What are you doing chatting with a German, kid?"

Feliciano shrugged. "Nothing."

The stall owner's eyes widened in recognition when he saw Feliciano's face and he nodded, laughing loudly. "Ah, you're Roma's grandson, aren't you? Of course! What are you planning with that one?" He nodded after Ludwig.

Unfamiliar anger and annoyance filled Feliciano's gut, but he just smiled. "Ssh, quietly."

"Oh yes, yes, top secret and all that, I understand. Here, was it tomatoes you were after? There aren't many, I'm afraid."

After acquiring the tomatoes, some more flour, and even a few oranges, Feliciano left the market, but instead of heading out of the village he took a turn into a narrow side street. The entrance to the lane was barely noticeable from the outside. He headed down the

cobblestones until he reached a wooden, battered door, one with a crooked sign hanging overhead that read '*Cantina Verde'*.

Walking through the door, it could have been any cantina in Italy. Tables and chairs sat in a common arrangement, a bar ran the length of the back wall, and a few waiters wandered through the room. Feliciano bounced happily through the room and waved at the staff. They barely acknowledged him, something he was used to by now. Secrecy was the order of the day here. Through the back door, behind the kitchen, was another room, one which held some of the most secretive and dangerous meetings in the country. The resistance often gathered in this cantina to discuss matters and plan attacks. And there was a meeting today. The room looked up as Feliciano pushed through the back door. He smiled and again waved happily, but the partisans in attendance were as unresponsive as the waiters out front. Feliciano shrugged to himself and walked into the room. It was just as large as the front area, covered with tables and chairs and looking like a simple function area. There was no evidence to suggest the real purpose of the place.

Grandpa Roma stood at a central table and spoke evenly but emphatically to the assembled crowd. "The military presence in the village is increasing and we need to be extra vigilant. I know you have all been careful but at this time more than ever…" Feliciano quickly lost interest, barely hearing the words go over his head. It was a small gathering today, much smaller than the crowd who had gathered for the celebration the night before. The atmosphere could not be more different, everyone on edge and paying complete attention to Roma's every word. Lovino sat on a table, clutching a pistol between his hands and nodding at everything Grandpa Roma said. Feliciano rolled his eyes and wondered if the pistol was even loaded. Lovino really did get carried away sometimes.

Feliciano stood watching Roma for a few minutes more, trying to listen but unable to regain concentration. It all sounded the same to him by now. So he walked to the back of the room and turned on the small wireless radio that sat at the back table. Lovino turned and looked over at him disapprovingly, but when Feliciano raised the basket of tomatoes for him to see his mouth twitched in a tiny smile. Roma glanced over and also smiled at him, so Feliciano took it as approval to sit listening to the radio. He tuned it until he found music and leant against the wall, humming the tunes he recognised. He hoped he would not have too long to wait until Grandpa Roma and Lovino were ready to go home. Eventually a song came through the speakers, an English one that Feliciano had heard a few times but never really listened to. But this time the first word caught his attention and he listened intently.

Auf wiedersehen, auf wiedersehen...

Feliciano smiled. It really was a lovely tune, and he wasn't sure whether it made him happy or sad. Either way, it reminded him of Ludwig. Ludwig, who was so big and looked so imposing, but seemed somehow unsure and even shy. Ludwig who flew planes and played soccer and had three dogs and a brother he worried about. Ludwig who Feliciano had just met yet felt like he had known forever. Ludwig who was part of the German military occupying Italy and part of everything that Feliciano was supposed to hate and fight against. Feliciano looked over to where Grandpa Roma was leaning over a table, outlining a map of the surrounding countryside and speaking forcefully as the partisans looked on. Feliciano sighed to himself, and wondered why his eyesight was suddenly blurred.

Chapter End Notes

(YouTube) /watch?v=HAGqAFEsTpg

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino stormed into the kitchen, slammed the bag of flour down on the bench, and spun around to stare fiercely at Feliciano. Feliciano squeaked, took a step back and clutched the tomatoes to his chest. Lovino could look so scary when he wanted to.

"What is that irritating tune you've been humming all afternoon?" asked Lovino irritably.

Feliciano scratched his head. "Huh? Oh." He'd barely even realised he had been softly singing *'Auf Wiedersehen, Sweetheart'* since they left the tavern. He shrugged. "It's not irritating, it's pretty." He immediately started humming it again as he placed the tomatoes in the large but pitifully empty fruit bowl.

"It's stupid. Stop it. Stop it now."

"But Lovino…" Feliciano whined.

"You need to take things a little more seriously, Feliciano," said Lovino, his tone both condescending and frustrated. "You can't just spend important meetings like that sitting and singing along to the radio. This isn't a game. You need to be serious, like me and Grandpa." Lovino immediately jumped when Grandpa Roma walked into the room behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"What's all this I hear about being serious?" asked Roma, grinning cheerfully as he placed the small bag of oranges on the bench. "Don't listen to your brother, Feliciano, he's far too *serious* for his own good. And you have a beautiful voice just like your Grandpa!" Lovino opened his mouth indignantly but Roma just raised a hand and said, "Try this one…" before bursting into a loud, roaring rendition of Verdi's *'La Donna è Mobile*', his favourite canzone. Feliciano laughed loudly, clapped in delight and joined in while Lovino placed his hands over his ears and grimaced as though in pain.

"La donna è mobile,
Qual piuma al vento,
Muta d'accento — e di pensiero."

"Grandpa, don't be ridiculous!" Lovino backed away from them, looking indignant. "I meant it!"

Feliciano giggled and he and Roma just sang louder while slowly advancing on Lovino.

"Sempre un amabile,
Leggiadro viso,
In pianto o in riso, — è menzognero."

"STOP!" cried Lovino. As he continued to sing, Roma took a cooking pot from the bench and placed it on Lovino's head. He closed in on one side of Lovino as Feliciano closed in on the other, and they both sang as loudly as they could while Lovino seemed to be fuming with anger and trying not to laugh at the same time. "Go away! Stop it! Leave me alone! You're both crazy and I'm leaving this family!"

Feliciano and Roma, still singing, chased Lovino as he ran out of the kitchen into the front living room, where he immediately stopped short and fell silent. Feliciano looked over to find Antonio, their Spanish accomplice and informant, standing in the front doorway and smiling at Lovino in an amused way. Lovino turned bright red, tore the pot from his head, and scowled at the Spaniard. "What are you looking at, bastard?"

"Antonio!" cried Roma in delight, crossing the room and pulling the dark haired man into a warm embrace. "Ah, thank the good Lord! I was hoping to see you soon!"

"Greetings, Roma! It's good to see you!" Antonio looked slightly tired and a little unwashed, but his smile was as wide and genuine as ever. Feliciano liked Antonio. He was cheerful and friendly and always brought him something whenever he visited, which was more and more often these days.

"Antonio! Did you bring me a present? Huh, huh, did you?" asked Feliciano eagerly, rushing over to Antonio and jumping around him excitedly. Antonio laughed and ruffled Feliciano's hair. Lovino just folded his arms and scowled from the kitchen doorway.

"Of course I did, Feli! This time I have…" Antonio paused dramatically before reaching into the large bag slung over his shoulder. Feliciano waited impatiently before Antonio finally pulled out a soccer ball. Feliciano gasped and grabbed the ball from Antonio's hands.

"Yes! Perfect! I lost my last one, actually Lovino lost it, and it's been impossible to find a new one and I've actually been wanting one of these lately because…" Feliciano felt a sharp pain in his skull as Roma slapped him over the back of the head. "I mean, uh, thank you, Antonio!"

"You're welcome, Feliciano. And I have something special for Lovino!" Lovino stayed where he was, glaring from across the room.

"Lovino, my dear boy!" said Roma. "Stop being a rude little bastard and get over here."

Lovino reluctantly made his way across the room, his arms still folded and his face twisted in a sour expression. Antonio reached back into his bag, pulled out a small red object then tossed it in the air, caught it, and held it out to Lovino with a flourish. Lovino just glared at it.

"A fucking tomato?"

Roma cuffed him over the back of the head. "Watch your manners, young man."

Lovino rubbed his head and glared at Roma. "Why would I want a stupid tomato, Feliciano bought a bag of them today."

"Don't be impolite, and take the tomato."

"I don't want the tomato!"

"Take the fucking tomato, Lovino!"

Lovino snarled, snatched the red fruit from Antonio's hand, then immediately wrinkled his brow in confusion. His eyes flashed quizzically at Antonio, who simply winked.

"Antonio, a thousand apologies," said Roma, spreading his hands. "I love my grandsons to death but they can be such rude little shits."

Antonio laughed and clapped Roma on the back. "Please, Roma, there is nothing to apologise for. It is I who should be apologising for the delay in my arrival. The travel routes have become so difficult in the last few months."

Roma waved a hand dismissively. "Of course, of course, I understand this. I expect you have information for me?" Antonio nodded and pulled a pile of documents from his bag. Roma led him to the large central table where Antonio sat and spread the documents. They immediately began rifling through them and talking urgently. Once again Feliciano found himself bored and he fell into a couch beside the staircase, tossing the soccer ball from hand to hand. A few moments later, Lovino sat heavily beside him. Feliciano leant over to take the tomato from his hands, but Lovino was too quick and snatched it out of Feliciano's way.

"Lovino!" whined Feliciano. "Let me see, what is it? It's not actually a tomato, is it?"

"No," murmured Lovino, staring at the red fruit in his hand. "It's hard, like it's made of glass or something." He shook it and it rattled slightly. "I think you can open it, but I can't work out how."

"Oooh," said Feliciano, fascinated. "Why did Antonio give you something terrific like that?"

"Terrific? I don't even know what it is!" Lovino held the tomato shaped object to his ear and shook it again. He scowled angrily. "Stupid Spaniard. This is going to drive me crazy."

Feliciano shrugged and again focused on the soccer ball, occasionally looking over to where Roma sat with Antonio, speaking intensely. He wondered what actions this information would lead to this time, and how it would involve everyone around him. A few phrases caught his half-hearted attention, such as "planning a landing" and "German planes stationed nearby" and "need to gather more information on this," but most of it went over his head. Feliciano just prayed that whatever came of it would not hurt Grandpa, or Lovino, or Antonio. Or Ludwig. He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them, he noticed Antonio looking over and winking at Lovino. Lovino rolled his eyes, maintained his scowl, and looked away, even as the tiniest curve played at the corner of his lips. Feliciano tilted his head and narrowed his eyes as he watched. What was that about then?

Only a few minutes later, it seemed the business was already done. It had been fairly short this time, and Feliciano hoped that was a good sign. Roma and Antonio traded documents and when they stood Feliciano and Lovino went over to join them. Antonio gathered up his

bag and thrust the papers into it messily. "I will be in town for a few weeks, Roma, so I will keep you informed."

"Yes, yes. Please come around whenever you are free. Our home is your home, my friend."

"Of course I will!" Antonio smiled before pulling Feliciano into a hug. "Stay safe, Feli."

"Visit soon, Antonio!"

Antonio nodded and when he turned, Lovino took a step back. Antonio just laughed, leant forward, and whispered something into Lovino's ear which made Lovino's eyes go wide and his face turn bright red. When Antonio pulled back he was looking at Lovino with a mixture of amusement, delight, and something Feliciano could not quite put his finger on. Roma quickly gripped Antonio's arm and steered him insistently toward the front door before kissing his cheeks a little forcefully in farewell. "Until next time! Oh, and Antonio, tell me. Can you sing?"

"Sing? Why?" asked Antonio, his cheerful smile back in place.

"Because if you look at my grandson like that again, I will castrate you."

Lovino's eyes widened further and his mouth fell open. "Grandpa!" he cried, sounding mortified.

Antonio's face went blank before Roma began laughing raucously. Antonio sighed in relief and joined in.

"No, no," laughed Roma as he clapped Antonio on the shoulder, "But Antonio, really…" Roma cut off laughing and glared. "I'm deadly serious."

Antonio's smile faltered and he backed up insistently. "We'll… uh. We'll speak soon, Roma."

"We will!" Roma gave Antonio a cheerful smile and a happy wave. But when Antonio's eyes flicked over to Lovino, Roma made a distinct slicing motion below the waist. The Spaniard hurried out and Roma clapped his hands, spun around and grinned at his grandsons. Lovino still stared wide eyed and open mouthed. "So," said Roma merrily. "Who wants pasta for dinner?"

"Ooh, ooh!" cried Feliciano, running back to the kitchen.

"I'm leaving this family," muttered Lovino again as he dragged himself behind.

Feliciano walked slowly through the field to the oak tree, unsure whether Ludwig would be waiting there. He had said he would, and Feliciano hoped desperately that he would, but Feliciano knew that he could not be sure. He felt strangely like he knew Ludwig completely, like he'd known him forever, but he had to remind himself that they had only spoken twice and it was quite possible that Ludwig barely had a thought to spare for him. After all, the last two times he had met Ludwig had been purely by chance. Could Feliciano be sure that Ludwig would turn up when actually asked? He clutched his basket tightly in his hands,

hoping he would not simply be walking past the oak tree and heading towards the market alone as he did every day. But even as he tried to prepare himself for the worst, he drew closer to the tree and realised with a rush of joy that he could see someone standing underneath it. Feliciano's heart jumped in his chest and he ran the rest of the way.

"*Buon pomeriggio*, Ludwig!" he cried, breathless, his voice wild and joyful.

Ludwig nodded, his hands held behind his back, standing straight and alert in his immaculate grey uniform. He didn't smile, but his eyes were bright. "*Guten Tag,* Feliciano."

"*Guten Tag,*" repeated Feliciano. "Good day?"

Ludwig nodded again. "*Sehr gut.*"

Feliciano wrinkled his brow. "I don't know that one."

Ludwig's mouth twitched upwards slightly. "It means, 'very good'."

Feliciano's stomach filled with warmth. "*Grazie!*"

"You're welcome."

"No, no," said Feliciano, shaking his head, "You say '*prego.*'" Ludwig just nodded. "Say it, Ludwig!"

"Oh, uh…"

"Say it!"

"*Prego!"* Ludwig shouted as though he was answering an order, then looked immediately taken aback.

"*Sehr gut!* Isn't this fun?" Feliciano reached into his basket and pulled out the soccer ball that Antonio had given him. "My friend gave me a soccer ball. Do you want to play?" He dropped the basket to the ground and advanced towards Ludwig slowly. Once again Ludwig looked a little thrown.

"I'm sorry? You wish to play soccer? I thought you wanted a language lesson."

Feliciano smiled and shrugged a little. *"Giochiamo a calcio.*" Ludwig seemed a little awkward around him. But soccer… well, Ludwig played soccer. He liked soccer. Maybe he would feel more comfortable if he was kicking a ball. Feliciano thought it one of his more brilliant ideas and kept smiling as he tossed the ball from hand to hand. "Show me how good you are."

Ludwig raised an eyebrow skeptically. "I do not think you could keep up with me."

Feliciano smirked slightly. "We'll see." He quickly dropped the ball to his foot and kicked it with all his strength. Ludwig only just managed to catch it as it flew against his chest, then stumbled backwards a step before steadying himself and coughing. He looked up at

Feliciano, his expression surprised and impressed. Feliciano waited apprehensively. Ludwig opened his mouth as though to respond, stopped, then looked down at the ball. Feliciano could almost see him thinking. After a few moments Ludwig dropped the ball. He carefully removed his jacket, folded it, and placed it on the ground.

"Very well then. *Lass uns Fußball spielen."* Ludwig kicked the ball back.

So far, Feliciano was not very impressed. He dropped the ball to his knee, then to his ankle, and finally flipped it into the air before kicking it steadily at Ludwig, who was attempting to defend the oak tree which served as their goal. It sailed above his head and slammed into the tree. Feliciano threw his arms in the air and shouted, "Another goal to the Italian! That's six goals to me, Ludwig, I'm winning. Did you really nearly play soccer for Germany?"

Ludwig scowled and kicked the ball forcefully back to him. "I did. But not as a goal keeper."

"Why did you stop playing?" asked Feliciano as he ran forward and caught the ball. "What happened?"

Ludwig paused and ran a hand through the hair that kept falling in his eyes. Feliciano's heart beat a little faster at the gesture. It was somehow endearing. "War happened. And I joined the *Luftwaffe.*"

"*Luftwaffe* is 'Air Force'," said Feliciano proudly. He was quite certain he would be speaking fluent German in no time. Ludwig nodded and almost smiled.

"*Sehr gut.*"

"What do you like best? Soccer or flying?" Feliciano slowly began to back away, tossing the ball in the air and catching it as he went. Ludwig paused again. He always seemed to think about his answers before he gave them, Feliciano noticed. It was a smart strategy.

"They are very different."

"But you chose flying over soccer," said Feliciano inquiringly. Ludwig shifted his weight uncomfortably.

"I chose my country over soccer."

"Ludwig, wouldn't it be wonderful if instead of all this fighting we could just play soccer? Imagine, Germany and Italy and England could all have a soccer team instead of an army, and we could just play games to find out who wins, and then you wouldn't have to go off and shoot people. Ludwig, why can't we do that?" Ludwig looked startled and amused and almost sad all at once. Feliciano lined up the ball once again. "Although if you were in Germany's team I don't think they would win." He kicked the ball.

"Oh, is that right," said Ludwig. To Feliciano's surprise, this time Ludwig managed to catch the ball. He then immediately marched up to Feliciano and glared down at him. Feliciano's eyes widened and he took an unconscious step backwards. "Go stand in front of the tree."

Feliciano was sure Ludwig didn't mean to be scary, but it was certainly easy to see how he had become an officer. Refusing him just didn't seem to be an option.

"All righ… ah… yes, sir." Feliciano raced over to the tree and turned back to see Ludwig throw the ball in the air and catch it on his finger, spin it, then run it across his shoulders before catching it in his other hand. Feliciano stared astounded.

"You think yourself a better goal keeper?"

"I'm sorry?" Feliciano tilted his head to the side as he continued staring, stunned. Now Ludwig was spinning the ball on his knee. How was he doing that?

"Let us see if you can stop a goal from me, Italian!" Ludwig juggled the ball between his knees, flipped it into the air, then kicked it so hard that it went flying past Feliciano's ear and smashed into the tree. Feliciano was fairly sure his heart actually stopped in his chest. Ludwig smirked. "What was that phrase you used earlier? Oh yes… another goal to the German!"

Feliciano still hadn't managed to move. "Please don't kill me."

"Come on, Feliciano," said Ludwig as he retrieved the ball and kicked it back to his starting position. "You were so confident earlier!"

"That was before you nearly took off my head!" As Ludwig lined up another kick at the tree, Feliciano threw his hands up over his head. "*Dio mi salvi!*" he cried as once again Ludwig sent the ball flying into the tree.

Five more goals smashed against the oak tree and Feliciano was fairly sure of three things. One - he was the worst goal keeper in Italy. Two - pretty soon there was going to be a hole right through his favourite tree. Three – when Ludwig smiled, he was the most beautiful person in the entire world. "I believe one more and I win, correct?" asked Ludwig, lining up for the seventh goal. Feliciano decided he'd had enough.

"All right, that is it." He raced forward and kicked the ball out from under Ludwig's foot.

Ludwig just blinked and looked at him in surprise. "Hey, that's against the rules!"

Feliciano grinned defiantly. "Sometimes it is fun to break the rules, Ludwig. And besides, you can't win if you can't get the ball!" Feliciano laughed gleefully and took off with the ball, kicking and weaving it away from the tree and into the field. He looked back, half expecting Ludwig to be walking away, but surprised and thrilled to find him actually chasing after him. Heart pumping, head spinning, Feliciano guided the ball into the tall grass and laughed breathlessly when Ludwig overtook him and maneuvered the ball out from under his feet. Ludwig smiled widely, a genuine smile, one of the first Feliciano had seen on Ludwig's lips, and it took Feliciano's breath away. The momentary lapse was enough for Ludwig to drive the ball away and call back to him.

"You'll have to do better than that, Feliciano."

Feliciano grinned and chased after him. Running and laughing, the sun soaked ankle high grass brushing his legs, eventually he caught up with Ludwig and in one wild, unexpected, glorious moment their legs tangled and they both fell to the ground in a breathless, laughing heap. The ball flew forgotten into the grass. Ludwig's laugh was deep, but somehow different from his speaking voice. Feliciano's stomach flipped at the wonderful sound. It was almost like some unrestrained part of Ludwig breaking free. Almost winded, but still laughing, Feliciano rolled over to face Ludwig, only inches away. He certainly looked different now, his hair falling unkempt in his eyes and his shirt slightly rumpled as he lay in the grass. Ludwig's eyes met his and Feliciano gazed back. For a long moment it felt as though time stopped as they lay like that, their laughter softly dying away, until Feliciano could hear nothing but the sound of their breathing. An unfamiliar ache spread through his chest and it took him a moment to realise what this strange craving was - he wanted to reach out and touch Ludwig. He wanted it so much it hurt; he'd never felt anything like it. Just as Feliciano unthinkingly lifted his trembling hand, Ludwig suddenly looked away and gave a soft gasp. "*O, verdammt.*"

"Hmm?" asked Feliciano, taking the moment to drop his hand and try to bring his breathing back under control. Just what was he thinking?

"Oh, it is nothing, just…" An expression of embarrassment crossed Ludwig's face as he drew himself up into a sitting position. "I brought something for you, and…"

"Really?" Feliciano interrupted, his stomach fluttering as he sat up quickly. "What is it? What did you bring me? Is it a present? Will I like it?"

"It is not much, please, do not get excited." Feliciano nearly giggled. Was Ludwig actually blushing? He reached into his pocket, pulled out a rather battered looking wrapped bar and held it out to Feliciano. "And I think I squashed it. But, er, here. I hope you like chocolate."

Feliciano couldn't believe it. He had to stop himself from squealing as he took the bar. "*Cioccolato!* Oh! I haven't had chocolate since before the war! Where did you get this?"

Ludwig looked down at his hands, his cheeks still red. As big and tall as he was, he still managed to look almost like a little boy. "We had a little sent to us with our ration supplies this week. I don't really like it that much, so I thought..."

"Thank you, Ludwig! *Danke, Grazie*!" Feliciano immediately tore into the wrapper and took a bite, his eyes closing at the delicious melting taste of the chocolate. One of his favourite foods, it had been simply impossible to get for years now. He tried to savour it slowly. Feliciano had almost forgotten what chocolate tasted like; to taste it again was incredible. "Mmm. Ah, this is amazing. German chocolate is very good, it might even be better than Italian. Do you want some?" Feliciano opened his eyes to see Ludwig staring at him, his face red and his eyes wide. Ludwig coughed and looked away.

"No, thank you."

Feliciano shrugged. "All right. Although, do you mind if I save just a little bit for Lovino, because he really likes chocolate as well, and I think it would make him happy and he is so cranky lately, I think he needs something to make him happy… I think Antonio makes him

happy but I don't think he wants to admit it, isn't that strange?" Feliciano took another bite of the chocolate bar as Ludwig took a moment to respond.

"Who is Antonio?"

"He is our friend. He is Spanish. He gave me the soccer ball. And he gave Lovino a glass tomato and then he looked at Lovino all funny and Grandpa Roma threatened to castrate him."

Ludwig's eyes widened at that. "Threatened… to…"

"Castrate him. I'm not quite sure what that means but I think it has something to do with singing soprano. Ludwig, how do you say 'chocolate' in German?"

Ludwig blinked his slightly panicked expression away. "*Schokolade.*"

"*Schokolade,"* Feliciano repeated. "Isn't that funny, it sounds the same… chocolate, *cioccolato, schokolade*. I never would have guessed you had chocolate in your pocket. I wish I had something to give you, but I don't have anything interesting in my pocket." Feliciano really did wish he had something to offer Ludwig in return. Just to be sure, he dug around in his pocket. He came out with a piece of string and a slightly battered red daisy he had picked earlier. "Here you are Ludwig, you can have this." Feliciano held out the flower and Ludwig took it hesitantly. "In Italian flower is *fiore.*"

"Um," said Ludwig, just staring perplexedly at the flower. "*Grazie.*" Ludwig knitted his eyebrows together, brushed his hair impatiently from his forehead, then looked up at Feliciano with a confused expression. "Why...uh..." He did not seem to know what he wanted to ask. "Why do you want to learn German?"

Actually, Feliciano wasn't sure. He'd never even thought of it before meeting Ludwig. "Because… uh…" *Because it was an excuse to see you again*… He tried to think of something quickly. "Because… I…" He could not think fast enough. "…wanted to see you again," he finished quietly. Feliciano never was very good at lying.

"May I ask why?" Ludwig's eyes remained fixed firmly on the flower as he twirled it through his fingers.

"I like you." Feliciano also never thought before he spoke.

"But…" Ludwig broke off and paused for a moment, obviously thinking about his next words like he always seemed to do. He shook his head, but a tiny smile played on his lips. "I like you too, Feliciano."

Feliciano broke into a broad smile. He could not remember when he had last felt so dizzyingly happy. Those five words were the best he had ever heard. But then Ludwig sighed and looked up, catching Feliciano's gaze with those too-blue eyes.

"This is probably not a good idea, though."

Feliciano began to ask why, but stopped. He knew why. "No. Probably not. But I don't care."

Ludwig raised his eyebrows but did not look away. "You are unlike any person I have ever met."

"I hear that a lot. Is it… is that a bad thing?"

Ludwig paused then shook his head slowly. "No. Not bad at all." Silence fell between them and Feliciano looked at the ground, still smiling to himself. Ludwig cleared his throat and sat up straighter, adjusting his collar and pulling his shirt down. "I apologise."

"For what?" asked Feliciano in confusion.

"I do not… I mean…" Ludwig breathed deeply and focused on fixing his collar. "I am not used to speaking so openly. And I have not spoken with someone like this before. And please take no offence but I should not have spent the afternoon playing soccer with you, as this is not an acceptable use of…"

"Ludwig, would you like me to sing you a song?"

It took a few seconds for Ludwig to stop speaking, then he fell silent, one of his hands on his collar, the other still clutching the tattered red flower. He looked up slowly into Feliciano's eyes. "You say the strangest things."

Feliciano shrugged. "I hear that a lot too. But you looked like you were getting upset, and when Lovino gets upset, I always sing him a song. Sometimes he gets angry and yells at me but sometimes it makes him feel better even though he never says so. So shall I sing you a song?"

"Yes," said Ludwig, looking immediately surprised at his answer. "I mean, sure. Why not." Ludwig twirled the stem of the flower through his fingers. Feliciano smiled as he watched Ludwig's hands. So large and strong, but they handled the flower so gently. He paused a moment, breathed deeply, and began.

"Tutte le genti che passeranno, (And the people who shall pass)
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella, ciao, ciao, ciao.
Tutte le genti che passeranno,
Mi diranno «Che bel fior!»" (Will tell me – "What a beautiful flower.")

Feliciano fell silent, wondering if singing a revolutionary song to a German was a very good idea. But if Ludwig recognised the song, or the words, he did not show it. He simply gazed intently at Feliciano, his expression unreadable. Feliciano continued.

"*E se io muoio da partigiano,* (And if I die as a partisan)
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella, ciao, ciao, ciao.
E se io muoio da partigiano,
Tu mi devi seppellir." (Then you must bury me.)

Feliciano faltered again, and wondered if he should stop. But Ludwig looked transfixed and said quietly, "Keep going." Feliciano did.

"*E seppellire lassù in montagna,* (Bury me up in the mountain)
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella, ciao, ciao, ciao.
E seppellire lassù in montagna,
Sotto l'ombra di un bel fior." (Under the shade of a beautiful flower.)

Feliciano sang the song much slower than he usually heard it; a gentler, quieter version of the familiar tune. The words seemed so different now, when he sang them slowly, softly, instead of shouting them wildly while dancing in a crowded room. Ludwig listened silently as Feliciano sung the last verse so quietly it almost drifted on the breeze.

"*È questo il fiore del partigiano,* (This is the flower of the partisan)
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella, ciao, ciao, ciao.
È questo il fiore del partigiano,
Morto per la libertà." (Who died for freedom.)

The last of the words died away. Feliciano did not dare to look up at Ludwig. This felt so different to when he sang with Lovino or Grandpa Roma or everyone in the Resistenza. This felt like he was showing a part of his soul to Ludwig. It felt wonderful; it felt terrifying. Only after a very long silence did Ludwig respond softly. "What is that?"

Feliciano swallowed heavily. "It's just a little Italian song."

"What is it about?"

Feliciano bit his lip wondering how to describe it. Oppression… death… freedom… Then he looked back at Ludwig's big hands and what they held. "It's… it's about a flower." Feliciano forced himself to look up at Ludwig and felt immediately transfixed by his gaze. Ludwig stared at him as though he had never seen him before, and as though he had been looking at him forever.

"What is '*bella ciao*'?"

"It means 'goodbye, beautiful.'" Feliciano felt released when Ludwig finally looked away. He was almost breathless. Looking up, he saw that the sky was turning pink, the sun hidden behind orange tinted clouds. He was suddenly surprised at how much time had passed. "We have stayed too late," he said, hoping his voice did not sound as shaky as he felt. "I have missed going to the market. Grandpa will be upset."

"I apologise for delaying you." Ludwig let out a deep breath and closed his eyes. He almost seemed to be fighting with himself.

"Please don't. I much preferred being with you here." And it was true. Feliciano could not remember the last time he had felt so filled with happiness, just playing soccer and laughing and singing and watching the slowly darkening sky as the soft, scented breeze drifted past.

A sudden low, muted roar broke the stillness of the afternoon. The familiar sound of distant bombs echoed off the mountains. Everything slowed around them. Only the intermittent distant rumbling of the bombs disturbed the silence. The sun slowly broke free of the clouds, and Ludwig opened his eyes and looked straight into Feliciano's. This time neither of them

moved to looked away. It felt like all afternoon their eyes had gravitated towards each other. The cool afternoon breeze gusted gently over them and Feliciano had the feeling that if he didn't move soon, he may just never move again, sitting in this open field and staring into Ludwig's blue eyes. But then Ludwig broke the silence. "I have to go."

Feliciano sighed, disappointed. Of course, he knew Ludwig had to leave at some point. But he realised he didn't want him to… he never wanted him to. "I will see you tomorrow, won't I?"

Ludwig only paused for a second. "Yes, you will."

"Oh, good," breathed Feliciano. Ludwig's eyes still stared into his, and Feliciano's chest felt strangely tight. He felt so happy that he would see Ludwig again tomorrow, but at the same time a sort of unfamiliar ache and longing overwhelmed him. It was confusing. All he wanted was to hold onto Ludwig and not let him leave. He swallowed heavily and forced his lips into a smile. "*Auf wiedersehen*, sweetheart." He did not even realise he had let the *'sweetheart'* slip.

"*Bella, ciao*." Ludwig stood swiftly, placed the flower in his pocket, and marched off into the afternoon sun, stopping briefly by the oak tree to pick up his jacket. Feliciano just sat frozen, his heart thumping and his mind reeling. Had Ludwig really just called him beautiful?

Feliciano lay staring at the ceiling in the darkness, unable to even think about sleeping. His mind raced with a thousand thoughts; wonderful and terrible, beautiful and terrifying. And each and every one about Ludwig. It was so strange to feel like this; a feeling he had never felt before, yet somehow completely familiar. The stillness of the room almost smothered him, broken only by the very faint sound of the wind outside and Lovino's uneven breathing. The bedroom was large, but he could always hear the change in Lovino's breathing when he fell asleep. It was obvious his brother was still lying awake in his bed on the opposite side of the room.

"Lovino?"

"Hmm?"

Feliciano twisted his hands in the sheet. "What do you think of Antonio?"

There came the sound of a sharp intake of breath, quickly hidden by a cough. "Why on earth would you ask me that?"

"Well, don't you… like him?"

Lovino snorted derisively. "Like him? That Spanish bastard? Why the hell would I like him?"

"Well, I like him, and Grandpa does, and I just sort of thought that you did. Maybe. A little more than we do." Feliciano waited in silence for Lovino's answer.

"Well I don't."

"Oh. All right then." Silence fell again. Feliciano lay still, listening to the sound of Lovino's tossing and turning in the bed beside him. He tried to wait long enough for Lovino's anger to calm a little. "Lovino?"

"What?" Lovino snapped, sounding frustrated.

Feliciano knew his brother. He knew when he was lying, when he was exaggerating, and when he was hiding the truth with the opposite, which was exactly what he was doing now. "Have you ever thought of telling Antonio that you… don't like him?" There was no sound but that of Lovino's breathing. "Lovino?"

"Go to sleep, Feliciano." Feliciano nodded to himself, tried to focus on the sound of the wind, and twisted his hands in the sheets as his thoughts continued to chase themselves through his mind. He waited patiently until he thought enough time had passed. "Lovino?"

"For God's sake, Feliciano, what do you want?"

"You do like Antonio, and you do want to tell him, but you are worried about what might happen when you do. Not that I really blame you, because Grandpa Roma did threaten to castrate him and all, but maybe… maybe if you just explained…"

"Feliciano," said Lovino, quieter this time. Feliciano looked over at his brothers bed, but could only just make out the outline of his back in the dim moonlight that came through the window. "Sometimes we have feelings which we will never be able to express. Sometimes we have secrets that should stay that way. Sometimes…" Lovino stopped and Feliciano waited, holding his breath, to see if he would continue. "Sometimes there are things that are just not worth the risk."

Feliciano did not respond. He closed his eyes and thought through Lovino's words. It was true. He would never be able to express what he felt; the confusing but wonderful, scary but thrilling, world altering feelings that overwhelmed him when with Ludwig – just looking at him, speaking to him, sitting beside him, thinking of him. And true, maybe some secrets should stay that way. Who knew what Ludwig would think if he knew the depth of all Feliciano felt and wanted? If he knew that Feliciano wanted to touch him, wanted to stay with him, wanted to hold him close and never let him go? Feliciano faced rejection, ridicule, and so much more. Ludwig was a German officer. Feliciano was a member of the resistance. The risk was huge. Torture, execution, the destruction of his family and the entire resistance. Lovino was right. How could it possibly be worth it?

But behind Feliciano's eyelids Ludwig was all he saw – brushing his hair impatiently from his eyes; smirking as he smashed a goal against the tree; staring at him intently with eyes bluer than the sky. Confused and wide-eyed in an enemies uniform, smiling and laughing in the sun soaked grass. All Feliciano could think of was Ludwig. All he wanted was to be with him.

If Ludwig wasn't worth the risk, then nothing was.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

'La Donna è mobile' is from Giuseppe Verdi's 'Rigoletto'.

Giochiamo a calcio and *Lass uns Fußball spielen* = Let's play soccer.

Dio mi salvi! = God save me.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You will be careful, Grandpa?"

"I am always careful, little one. Do not fret. We'll be fine."

Feliciano nodded miserably and looked down into his basket. He had been so happy to see Antonio the other evening. Now he wished he had never turned up. Whatever news Antonio had brought with him, it had led to this necessary mission, and once again everyone Feliciano loved was putting themselves in danger. Something he should be used to by now. "I know, Grandpa. Please look after Lovino."

"I don't need looking after," said Lovino huffily as he made his way over to them at the front door. Roma reached over and pulled Lovino's coat across the pistol that stuck conspicuously from his pocket. "It's not even a dangerous mission."

"Every mission is dangerous," said Roma seriously, grasping Lovino's shoulders and forcing him to face him. "Understand?"

"Sure, yeah."

"What was that?"

Lovino sighed and rolled his eyes. "I understand, Grandpa. Every mission is dangerous."

"Good boy. Now Feliciano, head to the market, buy us some milk, talk to the informant, and by the time you get back this will all be over. All right?" Roma smiled reassuringly.

Feliciano nodded. He did not feel quite as confident. He had done this many times before, but now something felt different. "All right. Please be safe."

Roma laughed and ruffled Feliciano's hair. "My silly little Feliciano. This is not even a combat mission today! We are simply acquiring information - your specialty, yes? In fact, you should be coming with us!"

Feliciano knew Grandpa Roma was joking, but he still felt a little annoyed. He was putting himself in danger, too. He was a part of this. He was not a child. "I will get your information from the village, instead. I'll do my job, Grandpa."

"I know you will. You remember your code?"

"'They say a storm will hit before spring,'" Feliciano recited. "Right?"

"Perfect." Roma leant down and kissed Feliciano's cheeks. "See you tonight, Feliciano."

"Bye, Grandpa. Bye, Lovino." Lovino pressed a kiss to Feliciano's cheek and gave him a rare smile. They stepped out the door and Feliciano watched as Lovino and Roma walked down the road that led to the mountains, heading to bypass the village. Feliciano forced himself to turn away and made his way down the well worn path to the village, the bright mid-morning sun turning the fields to gold around him.

A tight ball of nerves sat in Feliciano's stomach as he walked through the crowded town square. It seemed like everyone was out taking advantage of the unseasonable mild weather, and a crowd of people filled the nearby market with loud bartering and banter. Feliciano's nerves grew stronger as he approached the unfamiliar cantina. It was not one he would ever choose to frequent on his own. Popular with both Germans and those comfortable with them, it was one of the most dangerous places in the village for a resistance member. It was also the least suspicious place in the entire town to meet someone on Resistenza business. Feliciano pushed through the busy lunchtime crowd and scanned the tables for his target. Almost immediately he spotted him, exactly as described... sitting at a table outside of the cantina on the street, wearing a red hat, reading a newspaper. Feliciano hurried over to the table, leant down, and whispered conspiratorially.

"It is hot for this time of year, isn't it?" The man just gave Feliciano a snide look before continuing to read his paper. Feliciano cursed to himself and tried again. "I mean, um, isn't it especially cold for winter?" The man's eyebrows furrowed but he did not look up. Feliciano swore a little louder. Damn these stupid code sentences he had to say, he could never remember them. "Um, I mean... something about the weather, cold, hot, strange weather, oh, I remember! They say a storm will hit before the spring. Um... no?" Feliciano started to fear that he was speaking to the wrong man. But then the man sighed deeply and placed his newspaper on the table.

"You're pretty damn lucky that I'm the guy you're looking for. Otherwise you could be in a bit of trouble."

Feliciano laughed in relief and fell into the opposite seat. "Sorry. I always start thinking about something else, and then I just forget because those codes are always so hard to remember..." Feliciano stopped speaking when he felt something brush his knee. He reached down to take the padded envelope from the man's hand and pushed it furtively into his pocket.

"The position of your major target, plus the names of the targeted officers. Very important. They really trust you with this information?"

Feliciano narrowed his eyes, annoyed at the insinuation. "I am dedicated to the cause."

"All right, kid. Just try and remember your code next time, yes? And keep that safe." Feliciano nodded grudgingly. A waiter appeared beside them with a steaming cup on a tray and the man threw a few coins on the table as he stood. "My friend here will take the coffee. I'm afraid I must be leaving."

Feliciano nodded again and thanked the waiter. He glanced carefully around him. Most of the customers were villagers, but he could see several German soldiers sitting at tables in and around the cantina. He prayed that no one had seen the exchange. He wanted desperately to

leave, but knew that to do so immediately would probably draw suspicion. The envelope felt like a bomb in his pocket. But he calmed down somewhat when he realised with a smile that the song playing on the cantina radio was *'Auf Wiedersehen, Sweetheart.'* Feliciano sat back in his chair, listening to the lyrics as he blew on the hot drink and tried to calm his nerves. At least he had gotten a cup of coffee out of all this.

"Feliciano?"

Feliciano jumped and winced as the hot coffee spilt over onto his fingers. He glanced up in surprise to see Ludwig looking down at him with a confused expression on his face. A shudder ran through Feliciano's entire body as he was hit by an attack of nerves and heat and hope and fear. "Lu – Ludwig! How..."

"What are you doing in this cantina?" Ludwig spoke harshly, surprise evident in his voice. Feliciano's stomach turned cold.

"Oh, I..." Feliciano quickly glanced around but could not see his informant anywhere. He hoped desperately that Ludwig had not seen anything. "I'm just... stopping for a coffee. I heard this place had the best since the war broke out." That much was true at least. The places that served the Germans had the best of everything. He gathered himself and smiled cheerfully up at Ludwig. "Will you join me?" Ludwig shook his head and glanced around quickly. He pulled at his collar in an unfamiliar, edgy gesture.

"No, I don't think so. I was actually just leaving the village."

"Oh," said Feliciano, disappointed. "I have to stop by the market, do you..."

Ludwig interrupted him. "I think... maybe I should walk you home, Feliciano."

Feliciano's cold stomach dropped to his feet. "Walk me home? Why?" He followed Ludwig's anxious gaze and immediately recoiled in shock, shrinking back into his seat almost unconsciously. Not far away, only just across the town square, a small contingent of German soldiers in sickeningly familiar dark uniforms marched steadily down the street towards the town centre. Even from a distance Feliciano could make out the armbands he had been trained to recognise. These were not *Wehrmacht*, the regular military. These were Secret Police. Feliciano's blood seemed to stop in his veins and he could barely breathe. All he could think of was the envelope. He had his death warrant in his pocket. Some of the villagers tried to discreetly filter away, some watched the passing police with a mixture of fear and anger, others stared blankly at the ground with an almost resigned acceptance. Feliciano could not move.

"Come, Feliciano, let's go." Feliciano could hear Ludwig speak beside him but could barely understand the words. He simply stared as the line of police parted and for the first time he noticed the two villagers they were marching before them. Feliciano drew a sudden, shuddering breath. He knew those men. He recognised them immediately as resistance members. A nauseating horror filled him as he suddenly realised exactly what was happening. Unreal terror rose in his chest but he still could not move as he watched the SS members march towards the centre of the square, the two partisans shuffling before them, hunched over, dirty and broken, rifles pointed at their backs. Feliciano felt a violent urge to

vomit and then everything started going too fast. One of the police shouted in German. A wave of panic ran through the crowd. Ludwig was still speaking. Feliciano still couldn't hear him. Someone screamed. The police reached the centre of the square and pushed the prisoners to their knees. The street spun around him. And suddenly Feliciano felt Ludwig grasp his arm, haul him to his feet, and insistently draw him away from the cantina and the commotion around them. "Just keep walking and do not look back."

"What are they going to do?" asked Feliciano, slightly loud and hysterical. He asked even though he knew the answer.

"Just don't look, Feliciano."

Behind and around him, the murmurings continued. The police yelled unrecognisable words in German, punctuated by someone translating into Italian, and though Feliciano tried not to listen, the words "Traitor" and "Resistenza" and "Torture" and "Death" resonated in his head and almost made his knees buckle beneath him. He could feel the dread and panic rise around him. Nothing seemed real except for Ludwig's hand around his arm, pulling him faster and faster away from the terrified crowd and the Secret Police and the condemned men and those shouted, evil words.

Feliciano let himself be led out of the town centre and down a narrow, empty street. Almost immediately the noise grew dim and the sun disappeared behind the tall stone buildings. But Ludwig did not slow down. "Keep walking, Feliciano," he said again, anxiously. Feliciano tried to keep up, tried to keep walking, tried not to think of the men on their knees in the square behind him. But when the first gunshot echoed off the stone walls he cried out, stumbled, and when Ludwig turned to steady him Feliciano simply clutched his arms and threw himself heavily, unthinking, against Ludwig's chest. He was shaking. This could not be real. This sort of thing didn't happen... not in the middle of a sunny day, not in front of an entire village. Feliciano closed his eyes, tried to hide his face in Ludwig's military jacket, felt Ludwig's chest rise and fall beneath his cheek. Then slowly, cautiously, Feliciano felt Ludwig's arms rise to hold him; one around his waist, the other against his shoulders, his hand resting gently on Feliciano's head.

The next shot tore through the air and Feliciano felt it like a stab to the gut. Because that man was fighting for the same thing as all of them. He could have been Grandpa Roma. He could have been Lovino. He could have been Feliciano himself. He was one of those who died for Italy. When Feliciano opened his eyes he saw the line of military decorations on Ludwig's chest, then slowly realised he was crying and that Ludwig was gently stroking his hair.

"I am sorry," said Ludwig softly. Ludwig sounded different this close. His heart beat rapidly beneath Feliciano's ear. He smelt like clean cloth and engine oil and sunlit fields. He felt warm and solid and strong. He felt safe, even though Feliciano knew that he was the furthest thing from it. And for the first time Feliciano wondered what Ludwig would think if he knew that Feliciano was no different from those men murdered in the square. "Come on, Feliciano. I will walk you home."

"I was supposed to buy milk..."

"I am sure your Grandpa will understand. Let's go."

Feliciano let Ludwig lead him from the village, grateful to leave the awful noise and terror behind him for the peaceful country road, the bright sunshine and the blue sky and the quiet, scented air. But the gunshots and the screams and the harsh shouts echoed in his ears. The condemned men's faces remained fixed in his mind. He had not known them well. He did not even know their names. But he had seen them talking with Grandpa in the cantina, had seen them laughing and singing along with the other resistance members. Feliciano had known of other local resistance members who had been killed. Over the years there had been many. But he had never been confronted with it like this before. It had never been so painfully real.

Ludwig walked silently beside Feliciano, matching his slow pace, keeping a small amount of distance while still close enough that their arms brushed occasionally. Neither had spoken a word since they left the village.

"What did they do, Ludwig?" Feliciano asked finally. "What did they do wrong?"

Ludwig's face contorted, looking pained and conflicted. "They... they are conspirators against the German military. They are our enemies."

Feliciano felt a stab in his chest. Enemies. The earlier events in the square had thrown this situation into perspective, made it perfectly and painfully clear. Ludwig was his enemy. And if he ever found out that Feliciano was a part of the resistance, then only God knew how this would end. Ludwig was loyal to his country. Surely that would be more important to him than the few afternoons he had spent with some insignificant Italian country boy. Perhaps Feliciano had been no more than an interesting distraction, and upon finding out the truth, Ludwig would drag him before the Gestapo as a traitor. And Feliciano realised that right now, this was what he feared the most - not death, but Ludwig thinking of him as nothing but an enemy. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "Did they deserve it? Do you think they deserved it?"

"It does not matter what I think."

"Yes, it does matter!" Feliciano stepped in front of Ludwig, forcing him to stop. "You don't seem to think that your thoughts and opinions matter. But of course they matter! What do *you* think, Ludwig? Not what you're told to think, or supposed to think. Those men were only doing what they thought was best for their country, the same as you. Do you think they deserved to be tortured and killed?" Feliciano knew he was saying too much. But he could not help it. Silent panic began to rise. Because if Ludwig thought like that... if he knew what Feliciano was...

"No," said Ludwig immediately, surprising Feliciano with the speed of his response. "To be tortured, to be publicly executed… no, they did not deserve that."

Feliciano sighed in relief. Then he covered his face with his hands, feeling tears beginning to rise. Lovino always said he cried too much. But Feliciano could not help it. When he was happy, he laughed. When he was sad, he cried. He wore his emotions for the world to see. He was beginning to realise how dangerous that really was. But he couldn't hide this. The day was not supposed to go like this. He was supposed to finish his coffee, then go to the market and buy milk, then meet Ludwig by the oak tree, then go home to Grandpa and Lovino, then…

"Feliciano."

Feliciano forced himself to remove his hands, hoping Ludwig would somehow not notice his all too obvious tears. Ludwig looked as much at a loss as Feliciano felt. He stared at the ground, then out at the distance, and then finally up at the sky. "How do you say 'sky' in Italian?" he asked finally. Feliciano did not answer, just gazing up at Ludwig silently. A brief silence followed before Ludwig continued. "Our language lesson, Feliciano, have you forgotten? I'd like to know how to say 'sky' in Italian."

"Oh," said Feliciano softly, trying to think properly. "It is *cielo."*

"And cloud?"

"... *Nuvola,"* said Feliciano, slightly confused.

"*Nuvola.* It sounds pretty." Ludwig gave him a rare smile and Feliciano's heart immediately leapt in his chest. "In German it is *Wolke.* Can you say that?"

By the time they reached the oak tree, Ludwig's constant questions had almost made Feliciano forget the earlier awful moments in the village. It did not feel like much later, as they sat against the oak tree with the sun descending in the sky, that Feliciano had forgotten everything except what was right in front of him. "No, Ludwig!" he cried, trying not to laugh. "You say it too strong! Softer, like this. *Albero.*"

Ludwig tried again, his face grim with determination. "*Albero.*"

Feliciano could not help but burst into laughter, putting his head in his hands. Ludwig was hopeless. "*O mio Dio*. No! Press your lips here..." Feliciano leant forward and gently touched his fingers to Ludwig's mouth. His fingers and eyes lingered far too long on Ludwig's lips before he hesitantly pulled away. "*Ascolti.* Listen. *Albero.*"

Ludwig narrowed his eyes in frustration and leant his head back against the tree. "That is what I am saying!"

"No it isn't, you sound like you are shouting it!"

"Well, you sound like you are singing it."

Feliciano shrugged. "All right. So try again, and say it like you are singing it."

Ludwig looked at him like he was mad, raised his eyes to the sky, sighed, then said it. "*Albero."*

"*Esatto!"* cried Feliciano, delighted. "You see, you can do it!"

"Why must you Italians say everything as though you are in the middle of an opera?"

Feliciano laughed loudly. "You say that as though it is a bad thing! But wouldn't it be wonderful to live your life as though you were in an opera? People doing such dramatic, impulsive things for each other. Opera's are always so wonderful and romantic."

"They always end so tragically," said Ludwig. Feliciano's face fell and he looked down into his basket. "But, with a lot of lovely romance and singing beforehand," Ludwig added quickly. Feliciano smiled sadly.

"Do you think all that romance and singing makes the ending worth it?"

"Maybe. Some things are just worth the risk."

Ludwig's words sent a stunning, almost painful shock through Feliciano's entire body, leaving him breathless and speechless. *Worth the risk…* He thought he had known what he was risking: Ludwig finding out he was Resistenza and turning him in. But it was so much more than that. Now Feliciano wondered how much longer Ludwig would continue to meet him. He wondered how long Ludwig would be stationed here. He wondered how many pilots were killed in every mission. And he suddenly realised how very short his time with Ludwig was likely to be. Feliciano could feel the tears rising again. He blinked rapidly and turned his face away, hoping the gusting wind would dry his eyes.

"You are unusually quiet all of a sudden."

Ludwig's voice shook Feliciano from his reverie. He forced himself to smile, but did not think he could look at Ludwig. It already hurt too much. "I was just wondering about something. I mean, I really like meeting with you like this. I am sure of course you are busy, but you seem to be unoccupied in the daytime… does that mean you fight at nighttime?"

"We usually do fight during the day. But we have been counteracting the British during night missions lately."

"So during the day, your superiors do not wonder where you are?"

"Officers are allowed a certain amount of freedom. And I am one of the *Luftwaffe's* best pilots." When Ludwig said it, it did not sound boastful. It simply sounded like a fact. "As long as I continue to do my job, they do not care what I do in my spare time. I like to head out to the countryside. It reminds me of home."

"Are you going up this evening?" asked Feliciano, trying to sound nonchalant, but full of emotions he did not know how to handle. "Into…" Feliciano did not even know the right word to use. "…into battle?"

"Yes," Ludwig replied softly. "I will be going up tonight."

"Please be careful, and come back." Feliciano knew it was a silly thing to say. He meant it, anyway. His eyes refusing to dry, he tried to hide his reaction by sifting through his basket. He was not sure what he was looking for, but he suddenly wanted something to do with his hands. The first thing he pulled from the basket was his small white flag and he felt himself burn bright red. He immediately shoved it back, hoping Ludwig had not noticed.

"Why do you carry that?"

No such luck. "Oh. Well. Most of the Germans don't understand English or Italian. But a white flag, they understand." Feliciano suddenly thought of the SS in the square and wondered if a white flag would work on them. "Ludwig, how do you say 'I surrender' in German?"

Ludwig looked vaguely surprised but answered anyway. "I suppose you could say '*Kamerad.*'"

Feliciano smiled awkwardly. "I suppose you've never said that before, have you?"

Ludwig raised an eyebrow. "Well, not in that context, no. And I don't think I ever will."

Feliciano felt a small wave of shame. "I must seem so silly to you."

"No." Ludwig said it with such an intensity that Feliciano nearly gasped. Ludwig immediately blushed and looked at his hands. Feliciano followed his gaze.

"I bet you're not afraid of anything," said Feliciano. Ludwig was a fighter pilot. He put himself in the most dangerous situations imaginable every day. How could he possibly understand Feliciano's silly little fears?

"Everyone feels fear sometimes. Without fear there can be no courage."

"Oh. I never thought of that."

"I think you could be very brave if you needed to be."

Feliciano looked up at Ludwig, stunned. No one had ever said something like that to him before. He smiled, his stomach fluttering. "*Danke*."

"*Bitte schön*," said Ludwig, plucking a blade of grass from the ground and studying it intently. "Your German is very good already."

"No! It really isn't."

"It is better than my Italian."

"Isn't it such an amazing lucky thing that we both speak English? Imagine, otherwise we would never have been able to talk, and I would never have known that there was a kind, wonderful German fighter pilot called Ludwig who was so nice to talk to and liked my singing and had such kind blue eyes." As soon as he said it Feliciano wondered if he had said too much. Silence fell but for the sound of the wind. Ludwig's eyes once again caught Feliciano's in an unbreakable hold. Feliciano was surprised by the look in them. Ludwig looked like he was fighting with himself, a look Feliciano had seen before. And suddenly, Feliciano was struck by how seriously dangerous this entire situation was. For his family, for his life; for his heart. Yes, only God knew how this would end. But Feliciano knew that he had no choice than to see it through and find out. Because it was simply impossible for him to walk away.

"I have to go," said Ludwig suddenly, shortly. "The rules are that we must be back by nightfall."

"Oh," whispered Feliciano, disappointed. It was the same as yesterday. But then Ludwig lifted his hand, hesitated, then slowly reached over and placed his slightly shaking fingers gently on Feliciano's cheek. And Feliciano was sure his heart would stop right then and there.

"Will you be all right to make your way home?"

"I… I…" For the first time in his life, Feliciano was quite sure he couldn't manage to speak. Ludwig's hand was warm and heavy and gentle on his cheek, driving thoughts of anything else completely out of mind. He swallowed heavily and forced himself to respond. "Yes," was all he could manage. Ludwig removed his hand and Feliciano felt an immediate sense of loss. When Ludwig stood Feliciano had to resist the urge to reach out and stop him. He was afraid of Ludwig leaving. Afraid of what it might mean. "You'll meet me here again tomorrow, won't you? Of course you will. Say you will. You have to."

"I will try. It is late, you should get home. Your Grandpa and brother will be worried." Ludwig took a few steps from the tree. "*Bella, ciao*."

"*Bello*."

Ludwig stopped but did not turn back. "I'm sorry?"

"Um, it's '*bello*.' '*Bella*' is feminine. And I'm not a girl, Ludwig."

Ludwig turned slowly, looking confused, sad, and almost amused at the same time. Feliciano suddenly felt he had said far more than he'd meant to. "No. You're not." Ludwig smiled slightly. "I apologise. *Bello, ciao*."

That smile made Feliciano's chest ache. It made him feel happy and excited and scared and lonely and unsure and so incredibly wonderful. It made him feel more than he ever thought it was possible to feel. "*Auf wiedersehen*, sweetheart," he whispered impulsively, not sure if Ludwig could hear him. And then Ludwig turned and headed across the field, leaving Feliciano sitting alone against the tree, feeling like the world was ending because Ludwig was walking away. The wind started to pick up and gusted strongly around him. Feliciano did not move until Ludwig walked onto the road and disappeared from sight.

Feliciano ran the entire way home, trying to beat the rapidly growing darkness, but when he finally turned into his front lane the sky was already a dull grey. Damn, he was so late! How was he ever supposed to explain this to Grandpa Roma? Halfway up the lane, he slowly came to a halt, a hot flush of fear shooting down his spine. The lights weren't on. The door was closed. Feliciano's pulse hammered in his throat and a sick feeling of dread attacked his gut. When he could finally move again, he ran.

Feliciano pushed open the front door and raced into the house. "Grandpa? Grandpa! Lovino, are you home?" No one answered. He ran into the empty kitchen, back through the hall, and checked the bedrooms before hurrying up the stairs into the attic. Every room was empty. He

frantically raced back down into the front living room, his breath coming too fast, sweat rising to his brow, everything still and empty and unreal. Feliciano's mind spun in a whirl of fear and horrific thoughts. Grandpa Roma and Lovino should have been home hours ago. What if they'd been captured? What if the Secret Police had them? What if they were being tortured right now, what if they would be executed in the town square in the morning, what if it happened to Grandpa and Lovino just like it happened to the two partisans in the square this morning… Feliciano didn't know what to do or think. A cold and terrifying panic threatened to overwhelm him.

Feliciano's breath caught in his throat when the sudden creaking of the front door cut through the still silence. He spun around and his knees almost weakened in relief when Grandpa Roma walked through the front door. Feliciano immediately launched himself across the room and into Roma's arms. "Grandpa! I thought you were being tortured! I thought they were going to shoot you! I thought you were dead! Oh my God, where is Lovino, do the Secret Police have him? What are we going to do!"

"Feliciano, ssh, stop, calm down." Roma gripped Feliciano's shoulders, pushed him to arms length, and looked him in the eye. "Breathe. I am fine. Lovino is fine. Everyone is fine."

Feliciano nodded and tried to clear the fear still clouding his head. "I just… you're late, and I worried…"

"You know that I'm late sometimes. What happened?" Roma looked at him in that way he always did when he knew something was wrong. Feliciano knew it was useless to try and hide it. He took a few deep breaths before trying to explain.

"Today in the town square. The German Police, the SS, they… there were two men, and they…" Feliciano couldn't finish the sentence. Roma sighed and pulled him back into his arms.

"Oh, Feli. I'm so sorry. Did you see…"

"No. Lud… I mean, I left the village when I saw them coming. But I heard… I heard everything they were saying, and I heard the shots, and…" Feliciano's eyes again filled with tears which he impatiently wiped away. He didn't want to think about that again. "But, I got you this." He pulled the envelope he had been given that morning from his pocket and pressed it into Roma's hand. "I did my job, see, just like I said I would."

"You're a good boy, Feli. You did well." Roma took the envelope and squeezed Feliciano's shoulder reassuringly. "I know it is hard sometimes. But you remember why we do this."

"Yes, Grandpa. For a free Italy." Feliciano pulled away from Roma's grasp, suddenly feeling almost guilty. If only Roma knew just how his grandson had spent the afternoon he might not be so kind. In fact it scared Feliciano to think just how he might react. It really was a dangerous and impossible situation Feliciano was getting into… and one he had absolutely no intention of getting out of. Already all he could think of was when he would next see Ludwig. Roma smiled at him reassuringly, unknowingly.

"Come on Feliciano, let's get some lights on and dinner started."

Feliciano nodded and followed Roma into the kitchen, then looked back at the front door in confusion. "Wait, Grandpa, where is Lovino?"

"He'll be home shortly, he's just a little slow because he hurt his ankle," said Roma as he gathered the pasta and tomatoes and laid them on the bench.

"He hurt his ankle?" asked Feliciano, immediately concerned.

"Oh it's nothing, really." Roma took the vegetable knife from the wall rack and began chopping the tomatoes. "Simply tripped on a rock, silly boy. He does get carried away sometimes. But we were already late and I wanted to make sure you were all right, so I left Antonio behind to help him…" Roma trailed off and froze, knife in mid-chop, his eyes wide and his shoulders rigid. "Hmm. That may not have been a very good idea, actually."

Feliciano tried to suppress a laugh as he placed a saucepan on the bench in front of Roma. He felt a little sorry for Antonio, knowing what he must be putting up with for daring to lend Lovino a helping hand. Then Feliciano looked at Roma's hands and felt worried for Antonio for an entirely different reason. "Um, Grandpa…" Feliciano reached over and carefully took hold of the vegetable knife. "I'll finish chopping the tomatoes."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Albero = Tree
O mio Dio = Oh my God
Ascolti = Listen
Esatto = Exactly

Chapter 5

Feliciano lay in long, sun drenched grass with Ludwig beside him, smiling, a ray of orange sunlight turning his hair to gold. He reached for Feliciano and pulled him close with warm, strong arms. Feliciano gasped, ran his fingers through that golden hair, shuddered at the soft touch of Ludwig's lips on his neck. All was silent around them… no one else existed in the entire world. Feliciano threw his head back and moaned. "Ludwig…"

A deafening bang exploded in his ears and Feliciano's eyes shot open, blinking in the sudden soft light. It took him a few moments to remember where he was, and when he did, he could hear Lovino's frantic breathing cut through the silence of the bedroom. He turned his head to see Lovino limp heavily from the front door to the dresser, take the glass tomato Antonio had given him from its surface, and clutch it tightly in his hand before smashing it suddenly to the ground. Feliciano blinked in shock and pushed himself upright, the last vestiges of sleep falling away. "Lovino, what are you doing?"

Lovino barely noticed him. He just dropped to his knees, placed the lantern on the ground and searched through the shards of glass until he found something. He held the tiny object up to the light. Lovino stared at it, unmoving, breathing heavily, before he closed his hand over it and clutched it to his chest. He laughed bitterly. "Bastard."

Feliciano pulled himself out of bed, confused and worried. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." Lovino put his head in his hands briefly. "Oh God, it's nothing, nothing."

Feliciano dropped to the floor beside Lovino, grasping his hand and opening it to see what he held. It was a plain, silver ring. Lovino did not protest when Feliciano took it and held the ring up to the light, turning it over in his fingers. There were letters inscribed on the inside. Feliciano read out the unfamiliar words. "*Te quiero.* What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Lovino repeated firmly. "Forget it." He snatched the ring back and thrust it in his pocket. "Just forget you saw it, and I'll forget I saw it, and we'll all just forget that any of this ever happened." Feliciano got the feeling he was talking about something other than the ring.

"Forget that what happened? Lovino? What happened?"

Lovino just shook his head and pulled himself to his feet. "Nothing," he repeated.

"What's the time? Why are you home so late? Where is Antonio? Grandpa said you hurt your ankle, are you all right? Lovino, you look like you are going to fall over."

"Feliciano," said Lovino as he limped shakily to his bed. "Go back to sleep."

Feliciano nodded reluctantly, realising that was the most he was going to get out of Lovino tonight. "Will you at least let me bandage your ankle?" Lovino responded, but it was muffled by a pillow. "I'm sorry?"

"I said, Antonio already did that. Now shut up."

Feliciano smirked at that. He quickly swept up the broken shards and discarded them, a little disappointed as he watched them fall into the bin. It was a shame that Lovino had to break something so pretty just to find out what was inside it. *Te quiero.* He would have to find out what it meant. Feliciano sighed and climbed back into bed, hoping that he could fall back into the same dream he had been woken out of.

.

The wind carried with it a deep and bitter chill as Feliciano walked through the cold morning air. The winter had been unusually mild so far, and even though the day before had been unseasonably warm, there had been a sudden change almost overnight. Feliciano could even make out snow on the mountains. Along with the sudden freeze, dark clouds had settled on the horizon, and Feliciano watched them uneasily as he strolled along the road. He never had liked winter storms, with the freezing rain and the piercing lightning and the thunder that rolled off the mountains and echoed back twice as loud. When Feliciano was little, Grandpa Roma used to say that the thunder was the old Gods fighting each other. That just scared him more.

Feliciano was fairly sure Ludwig would not be waiting for him this early, but he made his way towards the oak tree anyway. And when he made out the familiar military uniform and blond hair in the distance, his heart leapt and he ran.

"Ludwig! Ludwig, you came!" Feliciano stumbled as he reached the tree and laughed breathlessly when Ludwig grasped his arms to steady him.

"Careful," said Ludwig, but his lips twitched in a small smile.

"I was worried you wouldn't come ba -" Feliciano stopped himself. "I was worried you would be too busy."

"I am busy, but... not enough to keep me away." Ludwig shrugged helplessly. "I think only one thing would be."

The words sent a dizzying thrill through Feliciano, even as they filled him with dread. He did not ask what that thing would be... he did not want to think about that now. Today he wanted to forget the dangers, forget the right and wrong. Today, he just wanted to be with Ludwig. He looked down and realised with a jolt that Ludwig was still holding him by the arms. Ludwig noticed at the same time and immediately dropped his hands, turning red. "I'm sorry, I..."

"Come with me." Feliciano did not give Ludwig a chance to finish, to start overthinking and grow embarrassed. "I want to show you a place." He grasped Ludwig's hand then turned and headed across the field. "You like walking, don't you? That's good because it's fairly far away. Oh, but don't worry, we'll get there before noon. I'm not going to lead you into the mountains, Ludwig!"

"Uh... just where are we going?" Ludwig sounded a little surprised, but as though he was trying to hide it.

"If I tell you, it won't be a surprise!"

"It's a surprise?"

Feliciano laughed gleefully. "It is now!" Actually, he was not even completely sure himself where they were heading. But he was sure he would find the perfect place. A place where no one could find them; where they could be all that existed in the entire world. A place far enough away that by the time they walked there and back, they would have spent the whole day together.

Usually this field would be well tilled, but lately there had been little time for the usual work. The green grass brushed almost to their knees, occasionally brightening to yellow when the sun broke through the dark clouds. Feliciano was relieved to see that the darkest of them remained at a distance. Ludwig's hand remained warm and firm in his as they ambled side by side, heading towards the sloping hill at the end of the field. Feliciano swung his basket by his side and wondered if he would miss the market again today. He hoped so. After all, how could be not prefer to spend the day wandering over the countryside hand in hand with Ludwig? It almost felt like they could just keep going… keep going towards the mountains, away from everything, and never come back. Feliciano snuck a sideways glance at Ludwig to find him looking back. They both immediately looked away.

"The weather has certainly turned," said Ludwig quickly.

"They say a storm will hit before the spring," said Feliciano, before remembering the sentence as his code from the previous day. He glanced nervously at Ludwig, but he did not seem to have noticed anything unusual.

"It looks like it, doesn't it. Are you cold?" asked Ludwig.

Feliciano shook his head and smiled happily at the concerned tone in Ludwig's voice. "I'm fine."

Ludwig nodded. "And… how are you? After yesterday, I mean. Are you all right, Feliciano?"

Feliciano suddenly remembered the events in the town square and wished he hadn't. Today he was supposed to be forgetting all that. "Well... yes. Thank you for being there to... thank you for being there." Ludwig had not released his hand yet. Feliciano clutched even tighter to it.

"I did not want you to see that. You should not have to see things like that." Feliciano's chest leapt but he kept his eyes on the grass beneath their feet. Ludwig was silent for a long time. "We're not all like that," he said finally, almost a whisper.

"I know that. Of course you're not." Feliciano was certain, beyond any doubt, that Ludwig was one of the best men he had ever known. To compare him for a moment to those police in the square, whose job was to torture and maim and murder, was unthinkable. "You're a good man. I can tell."

Ludwig turned his head sharply, looking almost upset. "I've always been able to control things. But I am not strong enough to control everything, apparently."

"What a silly thing to say, Ludwig. No one is strong enough to control everything. Not even Grandpa Roma. And he's the strongest man I know. Once a tractor broke down in the field and Grandpa pushed it all the way home by himself. With Lovino and I sitting on it and yelling at him to go faster."

"He sounds a bit like my grandfather."

Feliciano was always so happy hearing even the smallest thing about Ludwig's life. He tried to imagine Ludwig's grandfather; if he was tall and strong and handsome like Ludwig, or as different from him as Grandpa Roma was from Feliciano. "Maybe our Grandpas would be friends if they met."

Ludwig gave a small shrug, but he did not look convinced. "Who knows."

The grass grew shorter beneath their feet as they reached the edge of the field and headed up the sloping rise. Clusters of trees dotted the landscape before them, the mountains rose in the distance, and the green rolling hills on all sides were splashed with patches of red and orange and purple. Ludwig stayed silent for the most part, letting Feliciano ramble on and point out the landmarks below as they climbed - the broken down tank that had sat by the roadside for a year, the outline of the village in the distance, the rows of farm houses growing smaller below them. With his stomach fluttering madly and a sort of wild excitement running through him, Feliciano felt the concerns and dangers and fears melt behind him the further away he walked with Ludwig. He felt practically giddy as he looked down at their hands still clasped… Ludwig had not moved to pull away. He passed his basket to Ludwig before leaning down to pluck a flower. He then placed it carefully in Ludwig's jacket. "That's a *giglio bianco*." Ludwig smiled and Feliciano's heart skipped a beat.

"White lily."

"*Esatto!"* said Feliciano, smiling back. He rattled off the names of the flowers he recognised as they passed. "And there is an *agno casto,* and those are *valeriana rossa*. And oh, here, we grow this in the garden." Feliciano plucked a sprig of rosemary and pressed it into Ludwig's jacket buttonhole next to the lily. "And there's *rosmarino*."

"That's for remembrance," said Ludwig. Feliciano blinked quizzically. "It's from Shakespeare. Hamlet," Ludwig explained.

"Oh!" said Feliciano in understanding. "Yes, Grandpa read that to us a few times. '*Pray you, love, remember.*'" He smiled wistfully. Grandpa always used to read English stories to him and Lovino, back before the war started and there were too many more important things to do. "Well there you are, Ludwig, now you will not forget me!"

"Feliciano, I don't need a sprig of rosemary to remember you. Nothing could ever make me forget." Feliciano laughed happily as Ludwig cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject. "You're not too cold?" he asked again.

"It is not so bad while walking." Feliciano gave Ludwig a strange look. He had already answered this question. "Are you cold?"

"No. Your winters here are very mild compared to my home."

"Really? Does it also rain a lot, like in England? Do you get lots of snow? Is it… oh, Ludwig, look, let's stop over here!" Feliciano noticed a small copse of trees, like a little dark island in the middle of the vast rolling green, and pulled Ludwig over to it. It was darker under the overhead foliage, but the sunlight still streamed through and bathed the thicket in gold and shadow. Feliciano finally let go of Ludwig's hand to wander between the tree trunks, leisurely reaching up and picking a leaf off each one. He twirled them absently between his fingers. "Do you miss it?" he asked, peering back up at Ludwig through a low hanging branch. "Your home?"

"Of course. Very much. And my grandfather. And my brother." Ludwig followed Feliciano at a short distance as they wandered under the dark cover of leaves. He seemed quite content to follow wherever Feliciano led today.

"And your friends?"

Ludwig scratched the back of his neck nervously. "I've never had many friends."

Feliciano was surprised. "No friends?"

Ludwig shook his head. "Gilbert was always the popular one. Usually people just seem afraid of me. Or I suppose I just don't talk enough to..." Ludwig shrugged. "I don't know."

Feliciano found that strange. He was usually afraid of everything... and yet Ludwig did not scare him at all. He reached up and plucked another leaf from a tree. "I'm not very good at making friends either, Ludwig. Although it's not because I don't talk... actually, I think that might be the problem. I mean, I always try to be nice to people, but they usually end up saying 'Shut up, Feliciano, you're so annoying!' or 'You're nothing like your Grandpa, are you?' or they just look at me strangely and walk away. You don't ever do that, though. You never tell me to shut up."

"That is because I do not want you to shut up."

Ludwig always seemed to know the exact thing to say to make Feliciano's heart leap and his knees weaken. He turned quickly to hide the silly smile that spread across his face, continuing to weave between the tree trunks and pick leaves. He came to one where the branch was too high and jumped a few times, his fingers straining to reach the leaf just centimetres out of his grasp. Then his stomach tightened when he felt Ludwig walk up behind him. He could smell the familiar scent of his jacket; could feel Ludwig's chest inches from his back, his close presence like an electrical charge. Ludwig reached up, his arm brushing Feliciano's shoulder, and plucked the leaf from the branch before pressing it into Feliciano's shaking hand. Feliciano just stared at it dazedly, suddenly overwhelmed with that increasingly desperate desire to touch Ludwig. He turned, almost in a daze. Ludwig was still so close behind him. But it wasn't close enough. Feliciano reached up and planted the leaf in

Ludwig's buttonhole, his fingers lingering too long on the firm chest. Ludwig raised an eyebrow.

"Soon I will have a garden in my jacket."

Feliciano laughed, forcing himself to drop his hands and look at the ground. He tried to breathe deeply; tried to remember how. He took a reluctant step back and shivered.

"You are sure you're not too cold?" asked Ludwig.

"No," said Feliciano immediately, hiding his shaking hands in his pockets.

Ludwig sounded unconvinced. "Your jacket does not look warm enough."

"It is just a little colder under the trees, that's all." Why did Ludwig keep asking if he was cold?

Feliciano heard a shuffling and looked up in surprise to see Ludwig shrugging off his jacket. He turned red and held it out, staring at his feet the whole time. "Here."

Oh. Because he was trying to give him his jacket. Feliciano bit his lip. It was such a silly gesture… something that Grandpa Roma would do to make the girls in town giggle. And yet Feliciano felt lightheaded, like his chest would burst, and his lips pulled into a smile he could not control. He was filled with such ridiculous happiness at the insistent gesture.

But then he looked at the jacket. The military grey, the decorations on the chest, the lines on the shoulder, the badges at the collar. The lily and rosemary; the eagle and the swastika. Feliciano's stomach dropped. Could he wear that? What would that mean? Before he could make up his mind, Ludwig took a step towards him and placed the jacket over his shoulders. Feliciano gasped, a sharp breath, inhaling the clean and warm scent. The jacket fell heavy and much too wide over his shoulders. He pushed his hands slowly through the arms and laughed when they did not reach the cuffs. Then he smiled up at Ludwig. Ludwig gazed back intently, his blue eyes bright. And Feliciano knew it was all right. It had to be all right. Because right now, it wasn't a military jacket. It was Ludwig's jacket.

"We're nearly there, Ludwig," said Feliciano, still unsure where they were headed. But he just took Ludwig's hand again and drew him out of the trees, into the sunshine and further up the green hill. They continued to climb as the sun rose higher and the chill of the air around them lessened. Feliciano was not sure if the new warmth that flooded him was from the sun, the jacket, or the fact that Ludwig again made no move to pull his hand away.

It did not take much longer before Feliciano found a suitable destination, a ruined structure that sat close to the highest point of the sloping hill. The ceiling of the old church had long since crumbled, but a few broken pillars and stone wall remnants remained scattered around a cracked courtyard. Grass and weeds pushed insistently through cracks in the stone floor, and long, green tendrils grew twisted around the few remaining arched windows.

Feliciano jumped up onto the eroded barricade that encircled the ruins, Ludwig holding him steady by the hand. He pointed out over the fields that spread out below them, the houses and

roads and buildings that looked like a tiny doll's village. "And look, Ludwig, there's our oak tree."

"Yes, it is very beautiful," said Ludwig, looking not at the view, but up at Feliciano. "Don't fall."

"Don't be silly Ludwig, you're holding my hand, I won't fall. And if I do you'll catch me." Feliciano made his way unsteadily along the rocky wall, clinging firmly to Ludwig's steady grip. He walked until they reached a spot where a few tall stone fragments blocked the direct sunlight. Feliciano smiled down into Ludwig's worried face. "Tell me more about your home. Tell me about your village."

"Very well, but only if you stop and get down before you hurt yourself."

Feliciano laughed and let Ludwig help him down. He sat on the broken wall, gesturing for Ludwig to sit beside him. "Well?"

"Well," said Ludwig thoughtfully as he sat. "It is small. And very similar to what you have here… farms, and fields, and trees. And yet different… wilder, almost. There is a beautiful castle that overlooks the town. And it is very old… I believe the castle dates from the fifteenth century. And in the village there is a beer hall, one that I go to with Grandfather and Gilbert every Sunday after church." Ludwig smiled slightly. Feliciano reminded himself to breathe. "All our lives we have gone to that same beer hall. And everyone knows each other; we have known each other our whole lives. It is warm and friendly. It is wonderful. It is home." Ludwig's face was alight, and the remainder of his awkwardness seemed to fall away. Feliciano was transfixed.

"I'd like to go there one day." A sudden low, muted roar broke the stillness of the morning. The familiar sound of distant bombs echoed off the mountains, but Feliciano determinedly ignored them. "Can we go there one day, Ludwig?"

Ludwig closed his eyes briefly. "Yes. We can go there one day." At that moment, the sun broke through the clouds and rose above the ruins behind them, shining down brilliantly, illuminating the green sloping rise, the clusters of trees, the bright patches of colour, the wide open fields and the scattered houses below them. Looking across the beautiful and familiar view, Feliciano could understand Ludwig's love for his home; his need to fight for and protect it, to serve in its name. It was something Feliciano understood far too well.

"I'd bet your village is just as pretty as this, Ludwig," sighed Feliciano. Pretty, beautiful, glorious... just like this day that he wanted to last forever. "Ooh, I know, I'll photograph it for you!" Feliciano reached into the basket Ludwig had placed on the ground and took out his camera. He hefted it up and angled it towards the stunning view before him. Ludwig immediately sat up straighter and leant over to look more closely.

"What's this?"

"My Grandpa's camera! Isn't it fantastic?" The camera was for the rare occasions he might have to take photographs of strategic positions. Instead Feliciano liked to take photographs of birds and flowers and pretty girls. "Lovino taught me how to develop the pictures and

everything. Smile!" Ludwig didn't, but Feliciano took a photograph of him anyway. "Here, now take one of me."

Feliciano pressed the camera insistently into Ludwig's hands and tried not to think of the irony of handing a German a camera which was intended to be used against him. He just gave Ludwig a bright smile, almost laughing as Ludwig took the photograph. "There. Now, I'll develop them tonight and show you tomorrow." Feliciano waited for Ludwig to hand the camera back, but he just turned it over in his hands, staring at it intently. Feliciano waited as Ludwig looked it over thoroughly before finally looking up apologetically.

"This is a very good camera. One of the best."

"Really, is it? I don't really know much about that. Machines like this confuse me. I can never get the radio to work properly, I always seem to get someone yelling in Russian. And the first time Grandpa let me use the telephone I somehow had a thirty minute conversation with a man in Dublin. He was very nice but he kept calling me Fred." Ludwig laughed and Feliciano's stomach flipped. He so rarely heard that wonderful deep laugh.

"Well, it is certainly a wonderful machine." Ludwig placed the camera back in the basket. "And you are a strange, wonderful man, Feliciano. You are…" Ludwig stared at him in that way which confused Feliciano, delighted him, made him nervous and made the world stop around him. "You make me question everything I ever thought I knew."

"Um… I apologise?" said Feliciano, unsure if that was the correct response.

"Don't." Ludwig managed a smile and Feliciano's heart thrummed. He was fairly sure he was going to burst from happiness soon. It could not be possible to be this content just sitting and talking to someone. But this whole day had been wonderful, and Feliciano could never remember a time when he had been happier. He wondered if this was how Lovino might feel around Antonio if only he would calm down a little. Which reminded him…

"Ludwig," said Feliciano. "*Te quiero."* Ludwig turned white, then red, looked for a moment as though he was going to fall over, then began stammering a response before Feliciano interrupted him. "Do you have any idea what that means?" Ludwig paused, closed his eyes, and let out a long, shuddering breath.

"Oh. Oh, I see." He shook his head and almost laughed. "Why?"

"Do you know what it means? I think it might be Spanish."

"It is."

Feliciano was incredulous. "Why didn't you ever tell me you spoke Spanish, Ludwig, that's not fair, no wonder it is so easy for you to learn Italian when German is really hard for…"

"I don't speak Spanish," interrupted Ludwig. "It's just that my brother had a good friend who was Spanish, before the war, and he taught us to say a few words."

"Oh." Feliciano almost felt embarrassed. He was not used to the feeling. "But you understand '*Te quiero*'?"

Ludwig turned red again. "Well, it means... from what I remember, which might be wrong, I think it means… I love you." Ludwig said the words in a rush. Feliciano was not sure he had heard them correctly.

"I lo… oh." Feliciano stared into the distance, a little dazed. "I love you? Really?"

"Yes." Ludwig shifted uncomfortably and smoothed his hair absently.

"Oh." So Antonio was in love with Lovino. Feliciano could not say he was surprised, really. That would certainly explain a lot. And was really quite obvious, come to think of it. No wonder Grandpa Roma was worried. Maybe he thought Lovino would run away to Spain. Feliciano broke out of his thoughts and looked sideways at Ludwig, who stared fixedly at the ground. "What is 'I love you' in German?"

"It's... well, it's..." Ludwig went still and took a steadying breath. "*Ich liebe dich*." Ludwig said it so softly Feliciano could barely hear.

"I'm sorry?"

Ludwig looked up out across the fields, clenched his hands into fists, then turned to face Feliciano. "*Ich liebe dich*."

Feliciano froze, caught in those eyes, the colour of the sky behind the clouds. Ludwig was so close. So warm, so real, so *everything*… "*Ti amo*." Ludwig blushed deeper and Feliciano stumbled over a few words, trying to explain while at the same time realising that he meant it. More than anything else he had ever said, he meant it. "In Italian, it is '*Ti amo*.'"

"*Ti amo*."

Feliciano shivered at the words, even though Ludwig was only repeating them. A familiar silence settled around them, heavy with hope and tension and uncertainty and confusion. It was abruptly broken when a massive roar tore through the sky. Feliciano looked up to see three planes flying in a triangle formation overhead. He still had not quite gotten used to the planes that were always flying overhead these days.

"Those are ours," said Ludwig, a hint of relief mixed with the pride in his voice.

"Wow," said Feliciano, watching as the planes disappeared into the distance almost as suddenly as they had appeared, leaving three white trails in their wake. "Is that what your plane looks like, Ludwig?"

"Yes."

"What is it like to fly in one of those?"

"It is…" Ludwig paused for a moment, searching for a response. "There is no word for it. Not in English, not in German. It is… indescribable."

"You love it. Flying." It was obvious when Ludwig spoke about something important to him. His eyes shone brighter and his carefully composed stiffness almost drained away. It was mesmerising.

"It is everything to me."

Everything. Feliciano nodded and absently plucked a weed that grew through the stone wall. He listened to the gentle sound of the wind rustling through the grass as the roaring of the planes finally disappeared. Then he took a deep breath and came to a decision. *Some things are just worth the risk...* "Do you have a girlfriend, Ludwig?" He was fairly sure Ludwig would have mentioned by now if he did, but Feliciano did not know another way to ask what he wanted to know.

"No," said Ludwig firmly. "My only girl is my Messerschmitt."

"Who's Mrs Schmitt?"

Ludwig almost laughed. "No, my plane. She's a Messerschmitt Bf 109. Her name is Greta."

"Your plane's name is Greta?"

"Yes."

"Greta Schmitt."

This time Ludwig did laugh. "Just Greta. We all name our planes. They are very special to us."

"But there is no special girl." Feliciano was aware that he was treading dangerously, but he did not want to stop.

Ludwig answered slowly. "No."

"Why?"

Ludwig's eyes flashed as he suddenly stared heatedly at Feliciano. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing!" said Feliciano quickly, leaning back, a small shock running through him. So Ludwig could look scary after all. "I didn't… I mean, I just… you're just such a nice guy and all I thought you would have had a girlfriend, I'm sorry if I upset you, I really didn't mean to."

Ludwig's eyes softened then he sighed and looked at the ground. "No, I am sorry. I just... no, I do not have a girlfriend."

"Why is that?" asked Feliciano carefully.

"Because… well..." Ludwig sat stiffly, on guard once again, far from his relaxed demeanour of earlier and nowhere near his normal composed and controlled self. "This is nothing, forget about it."

Feliciano's heart started to pound. "But, it sounds like there is a reason, tell me."

"Please, Feliciano." Ludwig's eyes were wide and he almost seemed to be trying not to panic. "Just leave it."

"I don't want to leave it, there's something you want to say, but you're not telling me! What is it?"

Ludwig did not answer right away. "You could never understand," he said finally, then immediately winced as though he had said too much.

"Maybe…" A small hopeful suspicion started to swell in Feliciano's chest. "Maybe I could. Understand, that is."

The silence was absolute as their eyes met. Feliciano felt like he was waiting on a knife's edge and he couldn't move, his body rooted to the spot, unable to look away, his breath coming too fast as the air became heavy with tension around him. How did time always seem to stop when Ludwig looked into his eyes like this? Ludwig finally tore his eyes away, his expression pained and conflicted. "Maybe I will explain another time."

Feliciano shoulders sagged as he let out a deep breath. "Oh." He was filled with frustration and disappointment once again. He did not even know what he had been waiting for, but he was fairly sure this wasn't it.

"I will explain, I just..." Ludwig leant forward briefly, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. "I need to think."

"That's all right. I can wait, Ludwig. I don't mind waiting." Feliciano hesitantly reached out and placed his hand on Ludwig's, half expecting him to push it away. But Ludwig immediately clasped it in his. "I'd wait forever."

The hours flew by like seconds, until to Feliciano's surprise and anguish, he noticed that the sun was swiftly descending to late afternoon. He did not want the sun to descend. He did not want the day to end. He never wanted to leave this place. Feliciano was starting to love these places - these magical spots scattered across the countryside where it felt like the world stopped and he could forget about everything but the grass beneath his feet and the sky above him. Places like the little thicket of trees and the oak tree and the golden field around it. Places he sat and spoke with Ludwig like they were somewhere else, somewhere only they existed, where they were not enemies and there was no war and no Resistenza and no sunset when Ludwig had to turn and leave.

"You will miss the market again today?" Ludwig's voice almost startled Feliciano.

"Yes." Feliciano did not know what Grandpa Roma would say now that he had missed the market three days in a row. Neither did he know how he would explain it. And he wasn't really surprised to find that he didn't really care.

"We had better start walking back."

That familiar sinking feeling settled in Feliciano's stomach. "Yes."

Ludwig stood slowly, pulling Feliciano reluctantly to his feet. They walked back slowly, silently. They did not need to speak. It was one of the first times in Feliciano's life when he was completely comfortable walking beside someone in silence. As they headed across the rise, down the hill, into the field, their steps grew slower and smaller until they were ambling and almost pulling back as they approached the oak tree. It was only when they reached the tree that Feliciano finally spoke, looking down at Ludwig's jacket as he prepared to reluctantly take it off. "Oh, I lost your flower."

"That's all right, I still have the other one you gave me." Feliciano blinked in surprise. "The red flower… the other day," Ludwig explained. "You had it in your pocket."

Feliciano's eyes widened in understanding. His chest swelled with joy, that Ludwig would remember and keep such a silly little thing. "You kept that?"

"Of course. I keep it in Greta's cockpit. It is my lucky charm."

But that joy turned into a now familiar ache when he looked up into Ludwig's face, into his eyes. Because Ludwig would soon be leaving him again, and Feliciano could not be certain he would come back, and this time the thought physically hurt. Feliciano shrugged off Ludwig's jacket, feeling immediately colder. He handed it over reluctantly. "Be careful tonight. Come back to me. Please. Tomorrow."

Ludwig nodded, his eyes dark and conflicted. "Yes. Tomorrow, Feliciano." Then he turned to walk away. And something inside Feliciano snapped.

"Wait, no."

Ludwig stopped short and turned back, looking worried at the almost panicked tone in Feliciano's voice. "Feliciano? What is it?"

Feliciano clenched his hands, tried to remember to breathe. Had he really said that? Was he really going to say this? But he had no choice. He could not let another day end like this. "Don't leave like this again."

"I don't..." Ludwig's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "It is getting late, Feliciano. You know I have to leave."

"Not like this. Please don't just say goodbye and walk away and…" He was unable to stop speaking the words. "I don't want you to go, Ludwig. I don't want you to go into battle. I don't want you to move base. I don't want you to go home to Germany. I want you to stay here with me, forever." Feliciano could not look at Ludwig. He could not bear to see the way he might be looking at him.

Of course the tears came. Feliciano did not bother trying to stop them. He was unsure of what he was saying, unsure of what was happening. All he knew was that he could not stop. "I'm sorry, Ludwig, I am. I don't know what I want but I… I know that if you just say goodbye and walk away again I won't be able to stand it, I won't, because every time you do I feel like

I'm dying and it hurts so much." He finally looked up to find Ludwig staring at him with an expression he could not read, almost like he was angry, and still Feliciano could not stop. "Please, Ludwig, don't just walk away this time, please stay and… and I just need… I just need you to… I need you closer, and…"

Feliciano clenched his eyes shut, angry at himself that he did not know what he wanted to say, or how to say it. He jumped when he felt Ludwig's fingertips cold on his cheek, then pressed into them, so scared that Ludwig would push him away. He opened his eyes to find Ludwig's burning into his. His fingers felt like icy fire as they traced over Feliciano' cheek and into his hair. Feliciano was just about to lose control and fall against him when Ludwig reached out and pulled him close until their bodies pressed together. Feliciano gasped at the stunning, perfect feeling. Yes, like this. Closer, like this - this was what he wanted. And then Ludwig leant down and his lips were against Feliciano's ear and Feliciano nearly cried out from the feeling.

"I said I would explain…"

"I… what?" Feliciano could hardly concentrate on Ludwig's words. All he could feel, all he could think was Ludwig's arm around him, Ludwig's fingers in his hair, Ludwig's lips whispering against his ear…

"Earlier. I said I would explain… another time. Not now." Ludwig spoke with barely suppressed urgency, his grip on Feliciano almost painful. Feliciano tried to lean further into it.

"Why, Ludwig?" Feliciano clutched the front of Ludwig's jacket with shaking hands, pressed closer, inhaled the smell of his hair. "Tell me…" He could feel Ludwig's heart beating... why was it so steady when Feliciano's was pounding like a drum?

"Meet me here tomorrow."

"I'll be here." Feliciano tried to hide himself in the curve of Ludwig's neck, to block out the sky and the world and everything in it until nothing existed but the two of them. "I promise I'll wait. I'll always wait for you." Ludwig straightened and pulled back, even as Feliciano tried to stop him. His eyes still held that familiar look of conflict, but they seemed calmer somehow. Feliciano wished he could feel the same but all he felt was devastation that once again Ludwig was leaving him. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "*Auf wiedersehen*, sweetheart."

"*Bello, ciao*." Ludwig held him for one moment more before tearing himself away and marching towards the road. Feliciano turned immediately and looked up at the growing storm clouds with wide, wet eyes. He was breathless, confused, stunned. And he could no longer watch Ludwig walk away.

To be continued…

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was immediately grateful for the warmth of the blazing fireplace as he walked through the front door. He was also grateful that Grandpa Roma and Antonio were busy talking at the front table… perhaps Grandpa would not even notice he was late. Feliciano dropped his basket on a side table and hurried over to sit next to Lovino on the couch by the stairs. It was the perfect spot to listen unobtrusively to the conversation. Lovino peered at him sideways. "You're home late," he said quietly. "Again."

Feliciano looked at his feet. "Well, it was such a pleasant afternoon, I was enjoying the walk."

"Pleasant?" Lovino's tone was doubtful. "But it's damn freezing today."

Feliciano shifted fretfully. "I like the cold."

Lovino narrowed his eyes. "No, you don't." Feliciano fidgeted with a button. "And where are the groceries? Weren't you supposed to go to the market?"

Feliciano kept his gaze on the floor. The last thing he needed was for Lovino to grow suspicious. "I meant to, but I… um… I got delayed."

"Delayed?" Lovino still sounded doubtful. "Doing what?"

"Picking flowers." Feliciano glanced nervously over at Grandpa Roma and Antonio, but they were deep in conversation.

"This is the third day in a row you have missed the market. I'm not stupid, Feliciano, I know something is up."

Feliciano looked down at Lovino's hands then stared him coolly in the eye. "I see you're not wearing your ring." Lovino narrowed his eyes, but he did not respond.

"… the fourth bombing raid harming civilians in the last month." Antonio's words caught Feliciano's uneasy attention. "These raids are flying out of the nearby German airbase which is why the American's mission is of vital importance to us. It is obvious the Germans are moving on from their counterattacks against the British. Last night their Heinkels killed nearly one hundred non military personnel."

Feliciano felt his body freeze, his mind go numb. His hands clenched onto the edge of the couch. A cold queasiness settled in his stomach. "What's a Heinkel?" he asked loudly. The room fell silent as Antonio, Roma and Lovino all stared at him. Antonio glanced inquiringly at Roma, who nodded.

"It's a German plane," explained Antonio. "A bomber."

"So, it's these Heinkels that bomb people? Not the Mrs Schmitt's?" Feliciano wasn't even thinking about what he was asking. He just had to know that Ludwig was not involved. There was no way Ludwig could be involved.

"The what?" asked Antonio. "The… Messerschmitts? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. The Messerschmitt Bf 109."

Surprised silence fell again. Lovino broke it. "How the hell do you know what a Messerschmitt is, Feliciano?"

"I… um…" Grandpa Roma, Lovino and Antonio were all looking at him in confusion. Feliciano didn't blame them – he had never shown any interest in this kind of talk whatsoever. "I just overheard it somewhere."

"Messerschmitts are fighter planes," said Antonio. "Not bombers. They only attack other pilots."

"Not civilians?"

"No." The feeling rushing through Feliciano's chest was like an enormous sigh of relief. He almost laughed. But Antonio continued. "However… it is entirely possible that the Messerschmitts could be escorting the Heinkels, especially now that the British counterattacks have been slowing down."

"Hmm. That could be a problem for the Americans," said Roma thoughtfully.

"Yes, exactly," said Antonio, starting to sound worried. Feliciano stared at him nervously. The feeling of relief was quickly replaced by a sense of nausea. "That's definitely something we will have to look into. Where did you hear people talking about Messerschmitts, Feliciano?"

Oh no. Feliciano went numb. He just stared blankly, panic starting to rise in his chest. "I don't remember," he whispered finally. He quickly kept talking. "And I… I was just wondering… did they, the Germans, did they mean to kill civilians? Was that what they were trying to do? It could have been a mistake, couldn't it? I'm quite sure it was a mistake." Now everyone looked at Feliciano like he had gone mad.

"Does it matter?" asked Lovino angrily.

"I just wondered."

"It seems their target was a munitions factory," said Antonio. "But of course they would have known civilian casualties were an inevitability."

"But they didn't mean to?" asked Feliciano desperately. "They didn't deliberately try and kill innocent people? Why would they… why would they do that, it wouldn't make sense, would it?"

"It made sense to them during the Battle of Britain." Lovino sounded accusing and disgusted. "Ever heard of 'terror bombing'? Ask Antonio about Guernica." Feliciano did not understand what Lovino was talking about. He did not want to understand. All he could think was that this was Ludwig's faction they were talking about. Ludwig's people who had done these things. Feliciano shook his head against it.

"I can't… I don't under…"

"We don't always know what the Germans…" began Antonio.

"That's enough," said Roma abruptly. He glanced at Antonio and spoke softly. "This type of talk upsets him easily."

Feliciano wasn't sure which made him more angry – that Grandpa Roma was treating him like a child again, or that he was right this time. "I just wanted to know…"

"It's all right, Feli," said Roma calmly. "Don't upset yourself. You don't have to listen to this. In fact, I don't think it's a good idea that you do."

Feliciano's hands clenched into fists. All he could think of was Ludwig… Ludwig who was so noble, so good… "No, I want to listen, I…"

"No," said Roma firmly. Then he smiled kindly. "Look, you're tired, Feli. Did you take any photographs today?"

Feliciano's stomach dropped before he realised that there was no way Grandpa Roma could know about the photographs. "A few."

"Why don't you go and develop them and then we'll listen to the radio before we make dinner?"

Feliciano nodded reluctantly. There was nothing else to do. They obviously were not going to let him hear the end of the conversation. He fetched his camera from his basket and headed into the next room, still hearing the voices behind him.

"Is he all right?"

"It's the talk of casualties. It disturbs him."

"I understand, but I think you should ask him what he heard about their Messerschmitts, Roma. That kind of information is vital right now."

"I'll ask him," said Lovino. Feliciano grabbed a lantern and headed into the cellar. He did not want to hear anymore.

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"Feliciano."

Feliciano did not turn when Lovino walked into the cellar dark room behind him. He remained focused on the film before him, turning it over slowly in the developing fluid. "Hello, Lovino."

"All right. Tell me." Lovino's voice was commanding.

"I'm sorry?" Feliciano was grateful his expression was hidden by the dark light.

"You're not yourself lately. Missing the market, coming home late. Your sudden interest in Grandpa's conversations about the cause. There's something going on."

"I don't know what you're talking about." This didn't feel right. Feliciano was used to telling Lovino everything. He felt awful having to lie about this. Lovino walked closer and Feliciano glanced up at his dark outline through the photos strung up on line.

"Well maybe you can explain something to me," Lovino continued slowly. "That chocolate you gave me the other day."

Feliciano's breath hitched. He could feel his hands start to shake. But what could Lovino know about that? "What about it?"

"I didn't give it much thought at the time," Lovino moved closer as he spoke. "But it's strange, isn't it. I mean, there hasn't been any chocolate around since the war started."

Feliciano's shoulders stiffened. Lovino knew something was wrong. He was not going to give up. "No, I... I..."

"Where did you get it?" Lovino stopped right before Feliciano, close enough that Feliciano could see him perfectly in the dim lamplight. It was times like these that Feliciano really wished he was good at lying.

"Um, someone gave it to me, and..."

Lovino held something out in his open palm and in the darkness it took Feliciano a few moments to realise what it was. When he did, his breath caught in his lungs. He couldn't move. The orange chocolate wrapper with its German writing was a silent accusation. Feliciano instantly regretted whatever silly impulse had led him to keep it. He swallowed dryly. "I found it."

"I thought you said someone gave it to you."

"I forgot. I mean, I forget. I don't know. I don't..." Feliciano raised his eyes in fear to meet Lovino's gaze. But Lovino wasn't looking at him. He was staring at Feliciano's hands, unmoving, the dim glow of the lantern throwing just enough light on his face to reveal his confused, almost furious expression. Feliciano felt dizzy. His hands shook uncontrollably. Slowly, unwillingly, he followed Lovino's gaze to the photographs he held in his shaking fingers. Two photographs, side by side. One of Ludwig, the iron cross at his neck plain and clear. One of Feliciano wearing his jacket. It felt like hours that they stood like that, still,

silent, the photographs a proven indictment between them. Feliciano finally let out the breath he had been holding. "Lovino..."

"I never... I never expected..." Lovino shook his head, astonished, almost speechless. "Is this a mission?" he asked softly, his words choked out. "A mission no one told me about?"

Feliciano wished he knew what to say. But he didn't. So he just told the truth. "No. It's not a mission."

Lovino picked up the photograph and held it before Feliciano's eyes. "Do you see that coat?" He sounded calm. Too calm. "Did you look at those symbols on that coat you're wearing?" Feliciano tried to look away but Lovino moved the picture before him. "Do you know what they stand for?"

"I didn't think about that, it wasn't about that! I was just cold and Ludwig..."

"Ludwig?" Lovino's voice was dangerously controlled.

"That's his name," Feliciano whispered.

"His name. This German soldier you have a photograph of... whose coat you're wearing."

Feliciano did not know what to say. He did not know what Lovino wanted him to say. "He's not a soldier, he's a pilot."

Lovino laughed bitterly. "Oh, I see. Well, that makes sense now. But I really don't give a shit what section of the military he belongs to. He's a German, isn't he?"

"Yes," Feliciano whispered, closing his eyes. He couldn't lie anymore.

"And you have a photograph of him because..."

"Because he's... he's my... friend."

Lovino's rage finally exploded. Feliciano winced as Lovino shouted. "Feliciano, you complete idiot, what the hell are you thinking! Have you gone completely insane? What have you told him?"

Feliciano's eyes flew open. Lovino's face was twisted in stunned fury. "No! It's not like that, I swear! He just… he's really nice, Lovino, even though he looks scary, he's not, he's..."

"Have you lost your mind?" Lovino cried. Feliciano did not stop speaking.

"...and we don't speak about the war, or about the cause, or any of it, I just like to be with him, and..."

"Oh God, Feliciano, stop, what the hell are you saying…"

"And he's honourable and good and he likes being with me and I… I think I'm in love with him." A deafening silence fell. For a second Feliciano thought Lovino was going to hit him.

Instead Lovino just stared, shook his head, and finally staggered back and fell into the closest chair.

"Feliciano, you complete idiot," Lovino whispered, wide eyed.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it."

"Oh, Feli." Lovino leant forward, his head in his hands. "I knew you had been acting differently lately. I would have noticed earlier if I hadn't been..." He cut off and took a shaky breath. "How did you even meet him?"

Feliciano spoke softly as he stared at his feet. "When I was walking to the village, last week, an angry soldier tried to hit me, but Ludwig stopped him."

"Does he know you're Resistenza?"

"Of course not!"

Lovino stared at Feliciano with a steely gaze. "Do you know what he would do to you if he did?"

Feliciano shook his head obstinately. "No. No, he would never hurt me, I know it, he..."

"Do you have any idea what Gestapo..."

Feliciano refused to listen. "I told you, he's a pilot! He's not Gestapo, he's not like that!"

"What did you think..."

"I don't know. I don't know, I didn't think anything, I don't care, please stop asking me these questions, I don't have any answers, I just love him and want to be with him and that's all I know and oh God, please, please don't tell Grandpa, he'll..."

Lovino stood slowly. "Feliciano. I don't think you realise how serious this is."

Feliciano's stomach turned cold and his hands shook again. He dreaded to think what Grandpa Roma would do if he knew. "Please Lovino. Don't tell Grandpa."

"Of course I won't tell him. It would kill him." Feliciano's gut twisted. "But you must never see this German again."

Feliciano's heart sunk even as his head swum with an overwhelming panic. He shook his head against Lovino's world destroying words. "No."

"I'm serious, Feli, this is not a game!"

"You can't stop me," said Feliciano. He tried to sound threatening. He knew he was pleading. He blinked back his rapidly rising tears. "You can't stop me from seeing him."

Lovino's eyes softened and he took a step closer to Feliciano, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. Feliciano flinched away. "Feli, you must have realised that he would not be stationed here forever. You must have known that this was going to end. I mean, what did you think was going to happen?"

Feliciano's heart pounded and his mind went blank. He had always known that Ludwig would not be here forever. But he had thought they would have more time. And he had never imagined Lovino would be the one to end this. "Please." Feliciano prepared himself to beg, to scream, to tell Lovino he had it all wrong, to fight, to run, to do anything to end this nightmare and make sure he got back to Ludwig once more. But before he could speak another word, Grandpa Roma opened the door and walked into the room.

"Come on boys, I thought we were going to listen to the radio before dinner!" Feliciano quickly hid his tear stained face and thrust the incriminating photographs into his jacket. Roma stopped short and looked from Feliciano to Lovino. "Is something wrong?"

"No," said Lovino quickly. "We were just coming now."

.

Feliciano woke while it was still dark. He glanced towards Lovino and heard nothing but his breathing. The night before, neither had said another word about Ludwig. But Feliciano had quickly made up his mind. He was not going to let Lovino stop him. He would not let anyone stop him from getting to Ludwig. If it meant he had to leave before anyone was awake and wait by the oak tree all morning until Ludwig arrived, well that was what he would do.

Feliciano dressed carefully, quietly, looking apprehensively out the window at the dark pre-dawn light. He hated the dark. But there was no other choice. Feliciano padded softly past Lovino, hearing no change in his breathing, then into the hall and out the front door. He closed the door gently behind him, pulled his jacket close against the cold, and headed towards the oak tree.

Walking quickly in an attempt to warm up a little, Feliciano glanced uneasily at the storm clouds visible through the dawn light on the horizon. They were growing closer overhead, though it should be a few days yet before the storm. He headed off the road, past the broken down tank, and into the field, grateful that no one ever ventured into this field or by the oak tree these days. He would have complete privacy to sit and dream and wait impatiently until Ludwig arrived. But as Feliciano approached the tree, his skin turned cold when he realised that someone was sitting beneath it. Confused and scared, he slowed to a dawdling pace, unsure whether to turn and run or walk closer and see who it could be. A local farmer? A resistance member come early to the village outskirts on their way to visit Grandpa Roma? Feliciano took another step and gasped, unsure he was seeing properly. His heart leapt, fire burned through his veins, and he ran.

"Ludwig! Ludwig, what on earth…" Feliciano was stunned. It was dangerous for Ludwig to walk here at this time. If an armed resistance member saw a German officer alone on the road before sunrise… "What are you doing here so early? It's not yet morning…"

Ludwig looked up with red eyes through messy, tangled hair. He leant against the tree, his clothes unusually crumpled, his handsome face weary and drawn. He looked exhausted. "Feliciano."

A shock of fear and confusion ran through Feliciano. He had never seen Ludwig like this. Never imagined the strong, composed pilot could look like this. Concern flooded him and he fell to his knees beside Ludwig. "What's wrong? Ludwig, what happened?"

"I'm sorry, Feliciano." Ludwig's voice was low and rough. "I'm so sorry. I should not be here, I…"

"Ssh. Stop. It's all right." Feliciano reached out a hand then snatched it back, unsure of what to do. It hurt to see Ludwig like this. "You look like you haven't slept…"

"I haven't. I came here immediately after…" Ludwig closed his eyes painfully and ran a hand through his unusually messy hair. "*Mein Gott*, I will be disciplined for this."

"After? After what?"

Ludwig made an attempt at a smile. "It was a bad night, Feliciano. That's all. It was a bad night." Ludwig broke off shakily. "I just… I just needed to…" He looked down into his hands, his gaze unseeing, his eyes hollow and dark. His next words came in a whisper. "I had to be reminded that there is something innocent in the world." Feliciano winced at that. Innocent. He settled slowly against the tree, reached out hesitantly and took Ludwig's hand in his. Ludwig let out a shuddering breath and gripped it tightly.

Feliciano did not know what to say. There was nothing to say. He just held to Ludwig's hand and tried to swallow past the rising lump in his throat. With a sickening pull at his gut Feliciano remembered Grandpa and Antonio's conversation from the night before. He desperately hoped that wasn't the reason for Ludwig's manner this morning. He realised it probably was. And that it did not change anything. It was so easy to forget the horrible things they had said when Ludwig was right in front of him.

Ludwig leant forward and put his head in his hand. "I could not stay at the base. Not after this. Not after our mission last night. I could not stand to be around them. And I could not think of anywhere I needed to be more than here. I want to forget everything. I need... I just need..."

"To get away from everything?" Ludwig looked up at Feliciano, almost startled. Feliciano understood. Because he felt the same. He also wanted to get away from everything; from Lovino's threatening accusations, from Grandpa and Antonio's world destroying conversations, from that place where he had to wait and lie and where everything was too real. "Because you know, Ludwig, that is what it's like, isn't it. When I'm with you, it's like no one else exists."

Ludwig paused, his eyes softening in understanding. "Exactly."

"So don't think about that, Ludwig. Don't think about them. Just forget, and be here with me." Feliciano wanted to say something to make everything all right. He wondered if there was

any way to make it all right. "Would you like me to sing to you?" he asked. He immediately cringed. What a ridiculous thing to say, Ludwig wouldn't…

"Yes." Ludwig responded immediately, gazing at Feliciano with eyes that stared right through him.

"All right. This song makes me think of you. But you probably won't like it." Ludwig looked at him inquisitively. "It's English," Feliciano explained.

"Why would I not like it because of that?"

"I thought you didn't like the English."

"Just because I am fighting them does not mean I do not like them."

Feliciano didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that. So he just sang, gazing up at the lightening sky in the grey dawn, sang the words that had become what he knew and felt every day.

**Auf wiedersehen...*

Feliciano fell silent. The storm clouds on the horizon were now clearly visible in the grey sky. He dropped his gaze, nervously, to find Ludwig staring almost dazedly back at him.

"That makes you think of me?"

Feliciano bit his lip uncertainly. Maybe he had said too much. "Yes."

"That is why you say that to me. *'Auf wiedersehen,* sweetheart.' I wondered." Feliciano twisted his free hand in his jacket but Ludwig just smiled. "Your voice is very lovely."

"*Danke*." Feliciano wondered why he was suddenly so nervous. Somehow things felt different this morning; his shoulder tingling where it pressed against Ludwig's, his hand burning in Ludwig's grasp. The cold dawn still and silent around them, the smell of the grass fresh and clean in the early morning air.

Ludwig looked up at the brightening sky then back at Feliciano. "Why are you out here so early?" he asked, as though he had just realised.

Feliciano hated having to lie lately, to find any explanation other than the truth. He was not used to it, and it was exhausting. He did not want to do it anymore. "It doesn't matter. I'm here." He shivered when a particularly cold breeze gusted past.

"You are cold."

"Yes."

Feliciano half expected Ludwig to give him his jacket again. Instead, Ludwig reached an arm around Feliciano, pulled him close, and Feliciano felt his heart leap into his throat. He slowly, carefully lay his head against Ludwig's chest, pressed into the familiar warmth and smell of

him. Ludwig rested his arm heavy around Feliciano's waist and Feliciano continued clutching onto his hand, spine tingling, pulse racing, filled with an unfamiliar exhilarating anticipation. They sat losing track of time, feeling each other breathe, nothing else existing in the entire world.

"You need to sleep," said Feliciano finally, almost afraid to break the silence.

"I know. I am very sorry to have bothered you." Feliciano could feel Ludwig's voice rumbling against his ear.

"Please don't be. I'm very happy that you came to see me when you were sad. Because that means that you thought I could make you happy, and that makes me happy, and I don't actually think you could ever bother me, Ludwig, never, even if I knew you for a thousand years." Ludwig did not respond but his breath hitched softly. Feliciano ran his thumb gently over Ludwig's fingers, breathed in deeply against his jacket. "Wouldn't that be nice, Ludwig, to know each other for a thousand years?"

"It would be the most wonderful thing I could ever imagine." Feliciano felt Ludwig's lips press against his hair and he shivered, inhaling sharply. The cold wind faded into the background and all Feliciano could feel was the warm rise and fall of Ludwig's chest beneath him. The most wonderful thing he could ever imagine...

"Do you remember, yesterday afternoon..." The words were out before Feliciano thought of speaking them. He trailed off shyly but Ludwig had already heard him.

"Hmm?"

Feliciano took a deep breath. He would have to continue now. "Well, yesterday afternoon, remember... you said to meet you here." Feliciano was a little unsure of what to ask. Their conversation the evening before had moved so quickly and dizzyingly that Feliciano was still not sure he understood just what they had talked about. He looked down at his hands nervously. "You said you would explain something. I said I would wait for you. I don't... I'm sorry, I thought..."

Feliciano felt Ludwig's chest move as he suddenly laughed. "Oh, Feliciano. Are you telling me you don't know?"

Feliciano lifted his head and looked at Ludwig quizzically. What was he supposed to know? He held his breath as Ludwig released his hand then reached up, brushed his cold fingers down Feliciano's cheek to his chin, and tilted his head until their eyes met directly. Feliciano remembered the first time he had looked into those eyes, how he thought they were the bluest thing he had ever seen. "Feliciano."

Feliciano froze, wide eyed. "Yes?" He could not speak louder than a whisper.

Ludwig looked at the sky, at the ground, closed his eyes, and took a deep shaking breath. Then he opened those blue, calm eyes. Everything stopped. "I am so in love with you."

The stars could have fallen from the sky and Feliciano would not have noticed. The ground could have split beneath him and he would not have moved. There was nothing, not a single thing in all the world, that could have struck him so deeply as Ludwig's words. "Oh." It was all he could say.

Ludwig no longer looked uncertain. He looked relieved. His fingers were so soft against Feliciano's skin. "That is why I had to be here this morning, Feliciano. That is why there was nowhere else. Because you change the world around me. You make it bright when everything is dull and grey and ugly. You take away everything awful inside me until there is nothing but you."

Feliciano could not move, held captivated by Ludwig's blazing eyes and earth shattering words. It was more than he had ever dared dream of hearing and he was almost numb with disbelief. He opened his mouth to respond but could not form the words. At Feliciano's silence Ludwig's eyes clouded with doubt, then panic. He dropped his hand and began to pull away.

"I am sorry. I was too bold, I…" Feliciano forced himself to move and pressed his fingers against Ludwig's lips to silence him. Ludwig breathed in sharply, his expression suddenly hopeful and uncertain. His hands were shaking. But all uncertainty had fled Feliciano's mind. The words Ludwig had spoken... the look in his eyes... Feliciano did not know what to do with this feeling of suddenly having everything he never knew he wanted. It was too wonderful. It was too completely right. He could no longer feel nervous... not now he knew how Ludwig felt. Not now he realised he felt the same.

"Ludwig," said Feliciano softly, letting his hand fall to Ludwig's shoulder. He felt strangely calm, even as his heart thumped furiously against his chest. "Ludwig, how do you say 'kiss me' in German?"

Ludwig blinked dazedly a few times. When he replied his voice was shaky. "...*Küss mich."*

"Küss mich." Feliciano repeated the words quietly, his gaze lowering to Ludwig's lips. He waited, trembling with anticipation, for Ludwig to respond. He did not wait long. Ludwig stared at him a few moments, gently placed a hand on the back of his neck, and Feliciano forgot how to breathe. His stomach turned into fluttering knots. He didn't move as Ludwig leant closer to him but he closed his eyes just as Ludwig's lips met his. And the world disappeared. The slight press of Ludwig's lips against his was soft, warm, gentle. When Ludwig pulled away a little Feliciano immediately reached up and pulled him back. "Don't stop," he whispered before bringing their lips together once again. Feliciano's chest soared as Ludwig moaned softly against his lips and tightened his grip around Feliciano's waist.

Yes. Like this. Finally, like this. Feliciano leant into the dizzying, gripping feel of Ludwig holding him, the pulse quickening sensation of Ludwig's breath mingling with his, surrounded by the smell and feel and breathtaking presence of him. When Feliciano parted his lips and felt Ludwig's tongue against his he thought he would melt. Melt into Ludwig completely. Because that was what this was, finally. Like nothing he had ever felt. Like everything he had ever wanted. Complete. Feliciano clutched Ludwig's shoulder, pressed harder into the kiss and Ludwig responded, thrust back hungrily and pulled Feliciano so tight against him he could barely breathe. Ludwig's fingers ran through Feliciano's hair to the back

of his neck and Feliciano gasped shakily against Ludwig's lips. A tingling tremor fluttered down his spine; his skin burned despite the chilled wind. He never wanted this feeling to end. Never wanted Ludwig to let him go.

The kiss gradually slowed and Feliciano opened his eyes to find Ludwig's blue irises staring into his. He lost sense of time as they stayed like that, their eyes locked, their lips barely touching, Ludwig's hair brushing his cheek and his hand still warm and firm against Feliciano's neck. "*Ich liebe dich*, Ludwig." Ludwig gasped and kissed him again, breathtaking and intense, warm and safe and complete. Feliciano sighed happily, more content than he could ever remember feeling in his entire life.

A sudden enormous roar tore through his head and Feliciano jumped, breaking the kiss as he gasped. Dazed and surprised, he followed Ludwig's concerned gaze upwards to where five planes roared through the sky, the noise tearing through the silent dawn.

"Those… aren't ours." Ludwig's brows knitted together, his expression a mixture of surprise and confusion.

"What?" Feliciano felt a little dazed, surprised by the sudden intrusion of reality. He tried to bring his breathing under control. Ludwig pushed himself upright and watched after the planes with a look of dawning understanding.

"Mustangs."

Feliciano was still almost senseless but his stomach turned cold at the alarmed tone. When an earsplitting blast exploded at a short distance, smoke rising immediately, Feliciano finally came back to himself. The morning turned real and cold once again. "What is it?" he asked, fear rising in his chest.

"Americans." A cluster of emotions flashed through Ludwig's eyes. Feliciano was terrified by the look in them. By what it might mean. "No, why now..." Ludwig ran a hand over his forehead in an exhausted gesture, pushing back his messy hair angrily. "*Verdammt!"*

Feliciano turned his head between the distant rising smoke and Ludwig's frustrated expression. **"**Ludwig, what's wrong, I don't understand..."

"I have to go. Immediately." Ludwig stood and Feliciano scrambled to his feet beside him, confusion and panic breaking. "The Americans are here."

The Americans... "What does that mean?" Ludwig finally paused, staring at Feliciano with a look of desperate, heartbreaking understanding. Feliciano understood immediately. Ludwig was saying goodbye. The ground swayed dangerously beneath him. "No…"

"Feliciano..." Ludwig's voice cracked.

Feliciano shook his head. "No!"

Ludwig stepped forward and pulled Feliciano against him in a forceful, desperate embrace. Feliciano held to him like he was drowning and Ludwig was air. The kiss was burning, bitter,

beautiful. It was over too quickly. Feliciano held to Ludwig with all his strength, but Ludwig gently and insistently pulled his hands away.

"Tomorrow, Ludwig." Feliciano had to choke out the words. This was all too sudden, too awful, too heartbreakingly unfair.

Ludwig's expression contorted in pain. "I don't…"

"Tomorrow!" cried Feliciano, refusing to let Ludwig finish that sentence. He was no longer able to hold back his tears.

Ludwig grasped the back of Feliciano's head, leant down, and pressed a fierce kiss to his temple. Feliciano shivered at the deep voice against his ear. "*Ti amo,* Feliciano. Forever." And then he left. Feliciano just stood still, alone and empty, practically numb. Too many thoughts flew through his mind, too many emotions flowed through him. When the world stopped spinning around him, when he could again feel his heart pounding in his chest, Feliciano sank to the ground. He felt paralysed. This wasn't how this was supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to get the one thing he truly wanted then have it immediately torn away.

Feliciano lost track of how long he sat like that, leaning against the oak tree, staring blankly at the sky, too devastated to cry. Only when the sun was high in the storm dark clouds could he bring himself to move, a worrying suspicion suddenly gnawing at his chest. Ludwig knew the Americans were here. There was a meeting at the cantina. Feliciano ran.

Chapter End Notes

I have unfortunately had to remove the lyrics to Auf Wiederseh'n, Sweetheart. You can, however, listen to the song here: (YouTube) /watch?v=HAGqAFEsTpg

Chapter 7

Feliciano was breathless by the time he reached town. He barrelled through the front door of the Cantina Verde, ignoring the derisive stares of the wait staff. He headed for the back room, but Lovino stood before the slightly open door and grabbed Feliciano to stop him running in. "Where the hell have you been, I had to lie to Grandpa... have you been crying?"

Feliciano whispered urgently. "I have to talk to Grandpa, the Americans are here."

Lovino looked at him blankly. "How can you know…" His eyes widened in understanding. "You were with him," he said accusingly.

"I didn't tell him anything, Lovino! I just wanted to see him, I..."

"Shut up, Feliciano, I want to listen to this. We will talk later." Lovino's words were a threat. Feliciano forced himself to stay quiet and listen through the door to Grandpa Roma and Antonio speaking in the next room.

"Perhaps it is not who you are thinking," said Roma. "Perhaps this is a common German name."

"It's not that common." Antonio sighed deeply. "I can't believe this. Of all the damn places the Germans are fighting in the world right now."

"You were friends with this German?"

"With his brother. We knew each other for years, we were even going to start university together in England; us and a French friend of ours. But then the war broke out and they both joined the military. I've tried to keep track of them over the years, but it's been difficult, even for me. My French friend is a Captain in the French Intelligence and basically untraceable. And the last I heard about the German there had been some sort of scandal with an Austrian musician and he was sentenced to a punitive unit on the Eastern front. He's probably dead by now."

"And his brother is on this list."

"That's right. The last time I saw him he was just a kid, quiet and plane-mad and already built like a tank. But he's one of the most honourable, decent people I've ever met." Feliciano smiled sadly to himself. So Antonio understood that the Germans were human beings. His friend's brother even sounded like Ludwig.

Roma paused for a moment. "Antonio, I hope you know..."

Antonio did not let him finish. "It's a shame, but there is nothing to be done. I know who my loyalty is to."

"Your loyalty. I must admit that I've been wondering lately, Antonio, if perhaps my grandson has anything to do with that."

The room fell silent. Feliciano looked at Lovino, who was just stared blankly, wide eyed, at the door. Antonio finally responded. "Roma..."

"I am not stupid, Antonio. It has been quite obvious for a long time now that you have feelings for Lovino. Too obvious."

Lovino's eyes grew wider and he reached out and clutched the door frame. Feliciano tried to think of something to say. "Lovino..."

"Shut up," Lovino whispered.

"Roma," said Antonio again. "You know I would never..."

"I have nothing against your preferences, my friend, as far as I am concerned each man's personal business is his own. But you can be quite oblivious to things at times so I will spell this out. Lovino obviously does not return your feelings. You need to accept that, and let it go." Lovino closed his eyes and leant his forehead against the doorframe. "I am sorry, this is not what we were talking about. I just felt it needed to be said."

"Fair enough. And I feel it needs to be said that my loyalty has always been to a free Italy and to any group that opposes the German fascist movement. Do not forget what brought me here, Roma, or the reasons I choose to risk my life for a country that is not my own. And none of my personal relationships have anything to do with that - not my former friendships with German officers or my feelings towards your grandson. And while we are on the subject, Lovino is a grown man, capable of making his own decisions. As is Feliciano. They are not the children you treat them as."

Feliciano stifled a gasp. Lovino looked just as shocked as himself. People did not speak to Grandpa Roma like that. He waited anxiously for Roma's response. There was none. Instead Antonio kept speaking.

"But you are right, Roma. This is not what we were talking about. In regards to the current plans, let us hope this stupid American blunder will not upset things too badly. It looks as though our best opportunity is still on Wednesday morning, but you can talk more about that during the meeting. Feliciano, Lovino, are you going to come in or are you going to stand listening outside the door all morning?"

Feliciano and Lovino looked at each other in brief surprise before Lovino composed himself and pushed through the door. "Don't go acting clever, bastard, I only just got here ten seconds ago. Oh, and in case you were interested, apparently the first Mustangs have flown over. I thought they weren't due until Wednesday." Lovino swung himself onto a table, too obviously trying to avoid looking in Antonio's direction. Antonio gave him a quick smile before running an exhausted hand through his hair and turning away.

Feliciano slowly followed Lovino into the room, slightly puzzled. He was sure he hadn't mentioned anything about the Mustangs… Roma turned his unreadable glare from Antonio

and smiled cheerfully, leaning back in his seat behind his makeshift desk. Neither he or Antonio looked like they had slept in days.

"Good morning, boys! Yes, Lovino, it looks like we can rely upon the Americans to mess up our plans before they even begin."

"But… what… have the Americans landed?" asked Feliciano, shocked and confused. "Did you know they were landing? What are they doing here? What does it mean?"

"The main force hasn't landed yet," said Antonio. "Roma will explain everything in the meeting."

"Feliciano doesn't know about these things," said Roma, looking pointedly at Antonio. "He should not have to know about these things." Roma dropped a handful of papers onto the desk. "In fact, Feliciano, why don't you head to the market this morning?"

Feliciano shook his head insistently and took a step backwards, slightly panicked that Roma would force him to leave. He had to hear this, had to hear about these plans involving planes and landings and Americans. Had to hear what they meant for him and Ludwig. "No, I think I'll stay for the meeting today, Grandpa."

Roma looked uncertain. "I don't think that's a good idea. You remember how upset our talk last night made you."

"I want to hear." Feliciano lifted his chin defiantly, even as he took another step backwards. He did not want to fight for this. "I won't get upset. Honestly. I'm not a child, Grandpa, I have a right to hear what you're planning and besides, I'll be fine, I promise I will."

Roma stood and Feliciano's heart dropped. "Look, Feli..."

Antonio scoffed loudly and folded his arms. "So it's fine for Feliciano to risk his life bringing us this information and yet he's not allowed to hear how we are going to use it?"

Roma looked almost murderous as he glared over his desk at Antonio. "Don't you dare tell me how to speak to my grandson, Antonio. This is none of your business."

"Feli," said Lovino softly. "Maybe Grandpa's right. You don't have to hear this." Feliciano turned to him suspiciously. Lovino had never suggested he leave a meeting before.

At that moment three resistance members walked through the door and greeted Roma loudly. Feliciano took advantage of the distraction to head towards the back of the room and take a seat. His stomach felt sick, his head was pounding, his hands were shaking. He had never felt so nervous in his life. But nothing could make him leave. Thankfully Roma soon became too busy talking to the new arrivals to pay him much attention. Others soon joined them and the room filled quickly, everyone loud and talkative and oddly cheerful. Lovino occasionally turned and gave him a concerned glance, but Feliciano ignored everyone. His mind was somewhere else. He could still feel Ludwig's arms around him, his lips against his, could still feel him and smell him and hear the pain in his voice when he said goodbye. Feliciano

swallowed the lump in his throat. He sat hoping and praying and thinking of nothing but Ludwig. He sat waiting to hear what those devastating American planes really meant.

Grandpa Roma's first words of the meeting blended together, the usual talk of German movements and estimates and vigilance and things Feliciano never quite understood. It was when he mentioned the Americans that Feliciano really started listening.

"So, some of you may have noticed the Mustangs flying over town this morning." Roma's words were met by murmurs of assent and curiosity. Feliciano's pulse sped up. "Well, we're betting the Germans will have noticed, too. This was obviously not expected. It seems a group of American pilots on a scouting mission flew well off course and one of them, some cocky young Lieutenant apparently, thought it would be a laugh to drop a small explosive in an empty field." Roma pulled a map down from a hook on the wall. A few people leant forward to see it better. "The explosion occurred right…" Roma pointed on the map. "…here. Only a few miles from the German airbase."

"What does that mean for the assault on Wednesday?" asked one of the men. Feliciano's ears burned and his stomach jumped. Assault... "Wasn't it supposed to be a surprise attack?"

"It means the Germans have a tipoff about Americans scouting the area." Roma started to pace the room as he spoke, his words booming as usual and commanding the room's attention. "We need to work quickly to fix this stupid American mistake. The Germans can not know about the landings. The Americans are relying upon the element of surprise. We need to ensure they still have it. Silvano, we need you to get on the German's radio frequency and broadcast a false report. I'll give you the details in a moment. And Matteo, Antonio will give you misleading information to pass directly to the upper command levels convincing them the Americans are too held up in France to launch an assault here." Roma paused and surveyed the room. Feliciano tried to shrink from his gaze. "Convincing the Germans that the Americans are not attacking is of vital importance to our entire mission. If they know about the landing, everything we have worked for these last months will be for nothing."

Feliciano balked at the words, panic rising in his throat. He could not quite understand everything Roma spoke of, and wanted desperately to ask for clarification, but did not dare draw attention to himself. He twisted his fingers together nervously and listened anxiously, hanging on Roma's every word.

"Providing that everything goes to plan and the Germans remain unaware of the impending invasion, the rest of our plan should work perfectly as intended. A meeting has been arranged for the day after tomorrow – the day of the landing. Antonio has agents working to make sure this meeting still takes place. Thanks to my little Feliciano, we were able to acquire this information for the Americans." Roma held up a sheet of paper. Feliciano stared at it, feeling sick, feeling shattered. He knew immediately where that paper must have come from - the envelope he had been given in the German café. "This is a list of the most important men of the *Luftwaffe* in this area. These men are all top priority targets: high ranking officers, officers set for promotion, and their very best pilots. They must be taken out immediately in preparation for the American's aerial attack on the German military bases in Italy. All of the men on this list will be in attendance at the meeting on Wednesday morning."

Roma dropped the list on the desk and continued to pace the room. The paper drew Feliciano's eyes like a magnet. Grandpa Roma's words faded into the background and suddenly that paper was the only thing that existed. Barely thinking, Feliciano got to his feet and slowly made his way towards the desk. He felt like he was walking in a dream; his blood rushing in his ears, his mind frozen because he could not acknowledge what he was thinking. When he finally reached the desk Feliciano looked down at the papers strewn across it. One stood out, on the top of the pile, the words *'Target: Airfield'* scrawled across the top. A list of names ran the length of the page and Feliciano read through them, refusing to admit to himself what he was looking for, even as his skin burned and a sick feeling of dread ran through his veins. The list of Lieutenants and Captains and Colonels started to run together. And then he stopped. Everything stopped. Feliciano fell apart, felt his heart falter, felt himself break. The whole world closed in around him until there was nothing but that piece of paper, that list, those letters, and those three words they spelled.

Lieutenant Ludwig Beilschmidt.

Feliciano stared at the words until they blurred too much for him to see. When he finally looked up, confused and stunned and broken, the first thing he saw was Lovino, staring back, a look of uneasy apprehension on his face. Lovino's eyes darted to the list on the desk, over to Grandpa Roma, and finally back at Feliciano before widening in dismayed understanding. Lovino put his hand to his mouth, horrified. Feliciano did not know what to do. He could scarcely comprehend how he felt. He put his hands on the desk, leant forward, and Grandpa Roma's speech started to make sense again…

"We've managed to get the time and location through to the Americans. They will land in force, early, entirely without warning. Their first target is the German airfield." Feliciano's hands blurred before him as his Grandpa kept speaking, those words cutting into him, finally falling into place, making heartbreaking sense, slicing his heart to pieces. "Their objective is to take down the men at that meeting, and as many enemy aircraft and pilots as possible. Taken by surprise, most of the pilots should be killed before they reach their aircraft. This should see the destruction of the German air presence in this area…"

"NO!" The word was ripped from him, loud and terrified and devastated, before Feliciano could stop it. He slammed his hand over his mouth but it was too late. The entire room stared at him in shocked silence.

"Feliciano?" asked Roma finally, alarmed.

"I don't... I can't..." Feliciano's hands shook, his gut wrenched, his mind refused to work properly. "I mean... I mean..." He glanced dazedly around the room, the accusing silence confusing and terrifying him. Roma turned a concerned step towards him. Antonio looked just as worried. Lovino shook his head, glaring intensely; his face held a warning, deadly serious, almost pleading. Feliciano swallowed past the fear choking his throat. His eyes flicked to the exit and back. "I have to go." He ran for the door. Lovino reached it first, blocking the exit.

"You're not going anywhere," said Lovino firmly.

"Let me leave, Lovino!" Feliciano cried, trying to push past. Lovino grabbed his arms and held him back.

"No!"

"PLEASE!" Feliciano screamed, trying desperately to break free from Lovino's grasp.

"God damn it, I knew this would happen!"

"Stop!" shouted Roma. Feliciano could not help but freeze at the command. "What the hell is going on?"

Heart pounding, head spinning, Feliciano looked up at Lovino pleadingly. "Please," he whispered. "Don't tell him."

"Lovino? Feliciano?" Roma's voice was worried. The room erupted in low mutters, soft murmurs of confusion and curiosity.

Feliciano's pulse thrummed in his throat. The room started to spin. Ludwig... he had to get to Ludwig... "I won't tell Ludwig about the landing, I promise I won't, I just... I just have to see him, Lovino, I *need*..." Feliciano's breath came too fast for him to keep whispering.

"It's nothing, Grandpa," said Lovino loudly. His eyes were conflicted. He whispered. "Do you even know where their base is?"

Feliciano's heart dropped and his skin turned cold. "No..."

Lovino sighed in relief and loosened his grip. "Don't be stupid, Feliciano. You don't even know where you're going. There is nothing you can do."

Feliciano was going to scream. He was going to break. His legs were weak. The noise and light of the cantina were like shards of glass through his skull. The ground beneath him swayed unsteadily. The Americans were landing, were bombing the airbase. And he had no way of reaching Ludwig... no way of warning him. No way of saying goodbye. A sickening panic suffocated his lungs. "Lovino," he choked out, suddenly unable to see, to think, to breathe. "Lovino, help..." Feliciano stumbled, fell to the floor, and rested his head on the cool ground. Almost immediately he heard Grandpa Roma's voice speak beside him.

"You're all right, Feli. You know you have to breathe. Just breathe." Feliciano felt Roma's hand smoothing his forehead. "Everything is all right, you just overexcited yourself again. Now sit up." Roma pulled him upright and Feliciano clutched his chest. The room and everyone in it seemed cold and condemning. Roma glared at Antonio. "Do you see? *This* is why I don't want him hearing these things!"

Feliciano stared up at Lovino, silently begging him. Lovino's eyes softened and he immediately dropped to his knees, placed an arm around Feliciano and along with Roma helped him to his feet. Feliciano leant into Lovino gratefully and tried to hide his face from the stares of the crowded room.

"He's tired, Grandpa. He has been working hard. I'll take him home."

Feliciano lay on his bed, staring at his bedroom ceiling. Grandpa Roma's words spun in an endless loop around his head, hammering into him, breaking his world into pieces. The morning after tomorrow. If Ludwig did not meet him tomorrow, Feliciano would never see him again. He barely even felt Lovino's hand in his as his brother sat beside him on the floor. The room was too dark for mid-afternoon, the storm overhead almost ready to break. Thunder rolled so heavily the walls almost seemed to tremble. For the first time in his life, Feliciano was not afraid of it.

"You didn't tell Grandpa," said Feliciano softly.

"No," replied Lovino. "You really love this German."

"Yes." Sometimes, they didn't need to ask the questions

"Would you have told him about the attack?" Feliciano didn't answer. "Feli, he is our enemy. He fights to control us, to take our country from us."

Feliciano shook his head slightly. "No. He fights because his country tells him to, and he loves his country. He's a good man, Lovino."

"He's a German."

"Do you know, despite what you and Grandpa think, it is possible to be both." Lovino did not respond, but squeezed Feliciano's hand in understanding. Thunder punctuated the silence. "What if Antonio was your enemy?" asked Feliciano finally. "Wouldn't you still love him?"

"I don't love Antonio." Lovino said it too quickly.

"Yes, you do."

Lovino ran his thumb over Feliciano's palm, then lay his head down on his arm. His next words were so quiet Feliciano had to strain to hear them. "Antonio is going to die soon."

Feliciano turned his head sharply towards Lovino, shocked and alarmed. "What do you mean?"

"You know what he does, don't you?"

"Yes. He gives us information. About the Germans."

"Exactly. Don't you see how dangerous that is? Antonio is one of the German's most wanted men in this country. In Europe. One day they'll get him. They will torture him for what he knows, and they will kill him. He knows it. Everyone knows it. It is only a matter of time."

"But Antonio is clever, he's..."

"No, he's not. Because he won't stop." Lovino almost sounded angry. "He won't stop doing what he does and every day he moves another step closer to the Gestapo."

Feliciano's mouth fell open and he nearly gasped. "That's why you don't want to love him. Because you don't want to be hurt!"

Lovino laughed humourlessly. "It's not that simple."

"It is, though. It is also very selfish. You love him, but you are scared of something bad happening, and you're scared of having something to lose. But we never know what is going to happen, and we always have something to lose. I know you're scared, Lovino. You are scared of taking the risk. But let me tell you something..." Feliciano thought of those few beautiful afternoons with Ludwig, those glorious fleeting hours, the smiles and words and brushes of the hand; of those few stunning, shattering kisses, that all too brief and wonderful declaration under the oak tree. Then he thought of the very real possibility, the probability, that he would never see Ludwig again. That he would lose him, and the pain of it would be uncontrollable, overwhelming, consuming. And yet… "Some things are worth the risk after all."

Lovino lifted his head slowly and stared at Feliciano like he was seeing him for the first time. He smiled softly. "When did you become the wise one, Feli?"

Feliciano smiled back. "I've always been the wise one."

Lovino let out a deep breath and looked up at the window, his eyes shining. Feliciano could hear the wind rattling the glass. "When were you supposed to meet your German next?"

"He meets me every day by the oak tree. But with everything happening, the attack this morning, he probably won't be there tomorrow."

"You heard this morning, that wasn't an attack, the Americans were on a scouting mission. Those Mustangs are far away by now, the proper landing is still a few days off, and as far as the Germans think, the Americans aren't even landing at all." Feliciano gasped in understanding. Lovino was right. With the Americans gone, there was actually nothing to stop Ludwig from meeting him the same as he did every day. Feliciano's heart started hammering. "So, Feli. Go meet him tomorrow." Feliciano looked at Lovino in shock.

"You'd… you would let me go to him?"

Lovino touched his forehead to Feliciano's hand. "Yes. Go say goodbye."

Feliciano's heart immediately fell again. Yes, Ludwig would be able to meet him tomorrow. But it would be the last time. Feliciano squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "No, I can't." The Americans would attack the day after. Feliciano had heard it all earlier. They would attack during the German's meeting, destroy the airbase and the officers present. But if Feliciano warned Ludwig, he would be a traitor. How could he see him knowing it was the last time? "I can't… I just…"

"Feli…"

The tears came and Feliciano did not try to stop them. "I don't want to say goodbye, Lovino! I just want to be with him! I never thought I could feel the way I feel when I'm with him. If

you only knew how wonderful he is. He likes to listen to me, he doesn't think I'm annoying or that I talk too much, he likes my singing and he's so kind, and so shy, even though he looks so strong. He has a brother and a grandpa, just like us. He is so good and honest and... and he's everything." Feliciano wiped angrily at his tears. "So why did I have to meet him like this? Why did he have to be an enemy? Why can't I just be with him? Why…" Feliciano did not know how to express the angry grief that flooded him. He wanted to break something, to fall to the floor, to scream. "Oh God, why, Lovino? It's not fair. It's just not fair!"

"I know. It's not fair. But nothing in war is fair." Lovino broke off and took a deep, shuddering breath. "This wasn't supposed to happen to you, Feli. But at least you have a chance to say goodbye."

Feliciano felt his chest crushed by Lovino's words. That wasn't enough. How was that supposed to be enough?

"And Feliciano, one more thing." At the tone in Lovino's voice, Feliciano turned his head and looked straight into his brother's eyes. He shivered at the look he found there. The room suddenly seemed even darker. "My little brother. I love you with my life. But if you betray us... if you betray Italy... I will kill you."

To be continued...

Chapter 8

Feliciano sat leaning against the oak tree under a storm darkened sky. A swift, freezing wind shook the leaves and branches overhead and huge claps of thunder rolled threateningly between the mountains. Feliciano pulled his jacket closer and glanced anxiously across the field for what felt the hundredth time. He had barely slept the night before, too many thoughts and memories and fears assaulting his mind. He refused to admit the truth to himself – that he did not expect Ludwig to be here today. That he had no way to reach him. The thought terrified him, but he quickly decided: if Ludwig did not turn up, Feliciano would find the airbase and go to him. It could not be far - Ludwig walked there and back every day. There were Germans coming in and out of the village constantly. He could find it if he had to. Because he had to see Ludwig again - even if it was the last time. Feliciano made the decision, and promptly fell asleep.

Feliciano was woken by a cold hand on his cheek. He opened his eyes, blinking, to see Ludwig before him: those bright blue eyes and golden hair and strong, handsome, kind face framed by the black clouds behind him. Feliciano's chest filled with a bright, intense, breathtaking joy. He smiled slowly, sleepily, happily. "I'm dreaming."

Ludwig's lips turned upwards in a tiny smile. "Is it a good dream?"

Feliciano nodded, lost dreamily in Ludwig's enthralling eyes, a warm shudder spreading down his spine. "Yes. You're in it." Lightning flashed overhead; memory hit. Feliciano blinked away the haze, the joy vanished, and he fell forward against Ludwig, fell into his strong and secure and heartbreaking embrace. "Tell me I'm not dreaming, Ludwig," he whispered roughly. He wondered how long he had slept. The sky was so dark for morning. "Tell me you're here."

"I'm here, Feliciano. I'm here with you." Ludwig kissed him gently and Feliciano melted into it, Ludwig's lips and breath so warm in contrast with the freezing wind. Feliciano shivered as he felt Ludwig's fingers run softly through his hair. "I did not startle you?" Ludwig whispered against his lips. "You told me once to wake you slowly if I found you sleeping here. Do you remember?"

His throat choked with emotion, Feliciano could only nod. He ran his hands over Ludwig's arms, through his fingers, over his shoulders; smelt his jacket, felt him, held him, breathed him in. "I'm so glad you came." He laughed shakily. "I didn't think I would see you again. Yesterday, you scared me so much... I didn't think you would come back!"

"Nothing can keep me away, remember?" Ludwig smiled and kissed Feliciano's hair. Feliciano sighed, almost happily. "I am sorry I scared you. It was not what I thought. The Americans were not attacking."

Feliciano flinched. The mention of the Americans was like a splash of icy water. "So, they haven't landed?" He tried to make it sound like he didn't already know.

"No. That was just a scouting mission."

Feliciano's chest soared with hope. Ludwig knew it was a scouting mission. Maybe he already knew about the landing. "So, they have not landed yet, but…" Feliciano trailed off, knew he was speaking dangerously. But he had to know how much Ludwig knew.

"It was a diversionary tactic," said Ludwig. Feliciano started to breathe in cautious relief. He knew it was a diversion… the Germans had seen through it… they must know about the landing… "The Americans are too busy in France to launch an attack here just yet. They are trying to confuse us." Ludwig squeezed Feliciano's hand reassuringly, but Feliciano's heart turned to ice and a wrenching agony pulled at his chest. Ludwig didn't know after all. The Germans would be unprepared. It would all happen just as Grandpa Roma had said it would, just as it had all been planned, just as Feliciano had helped plan it himself. The Americans would land. They would attack. They would strike at the German airbase and destroy the place, destroy Ludwig, destroy Feliciano. And Feliciano could do nothing to stop it, could not even warn Ludwig - not without committing treason.

Feliciano could feel himself breaking. So this was it... this was the last time. He let the tears rise and hid his face against Ludwig's neck. He started to wonder if he had made the right decision in coming here this morning. This was a torture worse than anything the Gestapo could possibly do to him. Ludwig ran a hand gently up Feliciano's back, brushed the hair at the base of his neck. He took a shuddering breath against Feliciano's ear.

"I can not stay today."

Feliciano gasped, the pain in his chest turning to panic. He shot upright, rigid with shock. "What? No!"

Ludwig's eyes were pained. "I'm sorry. I should not even be here. I only have a few moments..." He looked at the ground, his cheeks reddening slightly. "Only a few moments, but I had to spend them with you. But I have to be at the base today."

Feliciano was speechless. He blinked rapidly in shocked disbelief. This was the one day they had left, and Ludwig was leaving immediately. It was too cruel.

"I'm sorry." Ludwig touched Feliciano's tears with cold, gentle fingers. He furrowed his brow. "You are different today, Feliciano. Is everything all right?"

Feliciano blinked away his shock and nodded. He was lying again. Why did he always have to lie… "I just don't want you to go."

"I know." Ludwig ran his hand down Feliciano's cheek, brushing away his tears. Feliciano's eyes fluttered shut as he focused on the feeling.

"Tomorrow, Ludwig. Meet me tomorrow, early."

"I can't tomorrow."

"No, that's right." Feliciano heard his voice coming from somewhere else. "Tomorrow you have a meeting." Ludwig froze briefly, a fleeting expression of surprise crossing his face. "Don't you?" Feliciano continued quickly. "I just assumed."

"Yes. Tomorrow I have a meeting."

"Oh." Feliciano felt lightheaded. Like nothing was real. Like he was watching all this from far away.

"But maybe the day after that."

"Yes. Yes, maybe." Feliciano smiled even though he felt like dying. "It's so unfair, isn't it?"

Ludwig nodded slightly. "It is unfair."

Feliciano clutched tightly to Ludwig's hands, stared intently into his blue eyes. Today they were darker, like the sky. "Stay with me, Ludwig. Stay with me today, and tonight, and tomorrow. Surely your meeting is not that important. Stay here with me, like this, all night." *Stay with me forever…*

Ludwig raised an eyebrow and smiled slightly. "In this weather? The storm is about to break."

"I don't care."

Ludwig sighed, his smile fading. "I really am sorry. I wish I did not, but I have to go. And you should get inside."

Feliciano's blood was like ice in his veins. He could not stop him. What could he say? He swallowed the grief choking his throat and tried to smile. "Then... then *küss mich*, Ludwig."

Feliciano could not believe how different a kiss could be. Only yesterday, his first kiss, and he had never felt so happy or right in all his life. Now it was his last and it felt like he was dying. Like he was losing the only thing that had ever really meant anything. Ludwig would leave and Feliciano would fall apart and nothing would ever, ever be able to put him together again. As his lips pressed against Ludwig's, their hands clasped tightly together, Feliciano tried to commit everything to memory. The way Ludwig smelled like grass and leather and always that slightest hint of something he could not describe; the way his skin felt so warm, so much softer than expected; the way he held Feliciano so tightly, but never enough to hurt. Feliciano held him as though it would stop him leaving, as though if he never let him go they could stay like this forever. But then it was over and Feliciano wondered how these fleeting memories were supposed to last a lifetime. When the kiss broke Feliciano's heart broke with it. Ludwig stood and pulled Feliciano to his feet.

"It won't be long, Feliciano. You said you could wait forever. Surely you can wait one more day." Ludwig smiled and it was like a dagger.

"Yes." One more day. Forever. What was the difference? Feliciano felt Ludwig's fingers slip from his and he almost fell. *"Auf wiedersehen,* sweetheart."

"Ciao, mein bello Feliciano."

It was then, at that awkward mixture of words, at that small heart stopping smile, that Feliciano knew. Beyond any doubt that could ever exist. He would never love anyone the

beautiful, agonising, world-changing way that he loved Ludwig.

Then Ludwig turned and began to walk away. The air became unbreathable. Feliciano bent over, gasping, his body wracked by physical pain, his entire life and everything in it falling to pieces around him. He was being crushed, destroyed. The world spun around his head and he couldn't stop it, he couldn't stop Ludwig, he couldn't betray the resistance, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't... Oh God. He couldn't let him go.

"STOP!"

The world stopped spinning. The wind stopped blowing. The sun stopped in the sky. Ludwig turned slowly.

"Don't go." Feliciano whispered it, his eyes on the ground, afraid of the words coming out of his mouth.

"Please don't do this." Ludwig sounded upset, almost frustrated. "It is hard for me too, but you know that I don't have a choice."

Feliciano tried to think of something. Anything. He could not let Ludwig go back to his base. What could he do… what could he say… what did he want… Feliciano slowly looked up. "Let's run away."

"I… what?"

Feliciano made himself move. He ran to Ludwig, grasped his arms, tried to make him understand. "Please. Let's just go, now. We could, you know. We wouldn't have to tell anyone, we could just..." Feliciano barely knew what he was saying and Ludwig probably thought he was ridiculous but he kept going, because he didn't have a choice, because it was their only chance, because above all he meant it. "There must be somewhere..." He broke off and looked towards the mountains.

Ludwig placed a hand on his cheek soothingly. "Feliciano..."

"Switzerland, Ludwig." Feliciano gulped back a sob and leant forward until his forehead touched Ludwig's chest. "Please, please let's go to Switzerland and just leave all this behind us, and then we can be together, and we won't have to worry about the Americans or about the Luftwaffe or… or… or anyone, or anything…" Feliciano held to Ludwig like he was the only thing in the world that mattered. Right now, he was. "We could do it Ludwig, right now, just you and me!"

Ludwig looked towards the mountains, paused a moment, then closed his eyes regretfully. "And what would we do when we got there? Have you ever even left this village, Feliciano?"

Feliciano couldn't stand this. Ludwig had to listen to him. He had to stop Ludwig from leaving. "No. I would, though. I would for you. There has to be a place, somewhere we can be somewhere else, somewhere it is just you and me…"

"Such a place does not exist. There is no place for us." Ludwig looked up at the oak tree. "Only here." He placed a hand gently on Feliciano's chest. "Only here."

It hurt so much because Feliciano knew it was true. He shook his head anyway. "Don't say that, Ludwig, please. There has to be…"

Ludwig kissed his cheek softly and Feliciano leant into it. "I will meet you the day after tomorrow, and we will talk about this, yes?" Then he pulled out of Feliciano's hold and took a step back. Feliciano immediately grabbed his arm, panic stricken.

"You can't go back to your base!" he cried, his tone edge with terror. Ludwig paused, and his demeanour changed immediately. His shoulders stiffened and eyes narrowed. He was immediately on guard.

"My base? What do you mean by that?"

Feliciano froze. This was it. This was the decision. This was the moment he would betray everything he stood for and fought for and believed in. Feliciano closed his eyes briefly. Nothing else was going to work. He had to tell Ludwig. Feliciano thought of Grandpa Roma, of Lovino, of Italy. And he made the decision. "The Americans are landing tomorrow morning." He said it softly, slowly. The voice did not sound like his own. "They are planning a surprise attack in your airfield to coincide with your meeting. They plan to take down the pilots before they can reach the planes and to destroy as many aircraft as they can. Their objective is to wipe out the German air presence in this area." Feliciano stopped and took a deep breath. "That's why you can't go back to your base, Ludwig."

The silence lasted far too long. Ludwig finally asked quietly, "Is this true?"

Feliciano nodded miserably. "Yes. Yes, I swear to you, I am telling the truth. But you can't tell anyone, please."

Ludwig's shock was evident, but he quickly pulled himself together. "I must leave immediately."

As soon as Ludwig spoke Feliciano realised the mistake he had made. Of course Ludwig would have to tell his unit at the base. Of course he would not stay away and let them be attacked unknowingly. But Feliciano still held to Ludwig's arm desperately. "No! Please!"

"You cannot expect me to keep this information silent, don't you realise, I would be committing treason!"

"Oh God, I didn't think… I didn't know…"

Ludwig suddenly went very still. His furrowed his brow in thoughtful silence then looked slowly, apprehensively back at Feliciano. Feliciano's skin turned cold. "How do you know this?"

Feliciano blinked up at Ludwig with panicked eyes. "Don't ask me that."

Ludwig's eyes narrowed suspiciously, his expression puzzled and wary. He pulled his arm from Feliciano's grip. "And you knew about the meeting. How could you possibly know about our meeting tomorrow? How could you get this information?" Feliciano's breath came faster. He tried frantically to think of a way out of this situation. He couldn't. "I said, how did you get this information?" Ludwig's voice grew louder and Feliciano gulped back his rising fear.

"I… I can't tell you," Feliciano replied in a very small voice.

"You have to tell me, Feliciano." Ludwig sounded uneasy, almost scared.

"Please! Don't make me say it! I only told you because I don't want you to be hurt, but if they knew I'd told you, if you told anyone else, it would ruin the whole mission…" Feliciano cut off, horrified, hearing the words as though someone else had spoken them. He choked back a gasp and shrunk back.

"Your mission? But what…" Ludwig froze for a moment. Something seemed to click in his mind. He turned white with a look of horrified disbelief. "You… you must be… you are Resistenza!"

Feliciano exhaled slowly. There was no use lying. He did not want to lie. He nodded helplessly.

"Of course. The other day, your reaction to those men in the square..." Ludwig's eyes flashed as he appeared to run through his memories. "And that's why you were in the German café. And your camera, your white flag." Ludwig's expression was bewildered, stunned. "You're part of the resistance."

"Yes." Feliciano could feel the first drops of rain starting to fall. He closed his eyes, his chest tightening painfully.

"All this time. All this... you never meant any of it." Ludwig's voice was cold and bitter.

Feliciano's eyes flew open. An icy shock ran down his spine. "What? Ludwig, no..."

"How could I be so stupid. That's what you've been doing. It all makes sense now. All those questions you kept asking. *Mein Gott,* all the things I *told* you! Getting close to me, earning my trust…"

This wasn't happening. This could not be happening like this. "No! You have to believe…"

"All the time gathering information…"

"No! I swear... please, it was never like that!" Heavy drops of rain fell on Feliciano's cheeks and mixed with the tears he could no longer hold back.

"All in order to betray me!" Ludwig almost shouted the words. Feliciano flinched.

"But, but no! Don't you see Ludwig, I'm trying to warn you, please listen…"

"Warn me? You're trying to trick me! I know how your resistance works, Italian!" The way Ludwig spat the word was like a dagger through the heart. Feliciano almost staggered backwards. "You'll do anything to deceive us." Ludwig almost gasped for breath as a deep spasm of hurt crossed his face. "Anything."

Feliciano's mind went numb with disbelief. Nothing was real. It was his worst fear come true: Ludwig thought he was an enemy. Thought he had been working against him. And if Ludwig did not believe him about the attack… "Ludwig, listen to me, they are going to attack tomorrow, please believe me…"

"Why should I believe you? You've been lying to me this whole time. Even this... of course... you are giving me incorrect information, trying to make me believe it."

Feliciano quickly gathered himself, clenched his fists, and forced himself to deliver his next words evenly. "Ludwig, please listen. Hate me, never see me again, tell your superiors about the attack or not, I don't care. But please, Ludwig. I am begging you. PLEASE don't be at your base tomorrow morning!"

Ludwig shook the rain from his eyes angrily, raised a hand to his head, almost disoriented. His face twisted in anguished fury. He almost stumbled backwards as he spat his next words. "Stop lying, Italian! I could have you shot, do you understand?"

Feliciano gasped painfully and clutched at his chest, stunned beyond all reason at the words. He could only whisper in response. "Why are you saying this?"

Ludwig wasn't listening. His eyes were wild with rage, with grief. "You, and your brother, and your grandfather… I could march you all into the town square and have you shot for treason!"

Feliciano felt the breath knocked from him, a wave of pure terror shocking him still. "Don't hurt Lovino and Grandpa." Feliciano tried to sound threatening but knew his shaking voice just sounded terrified. And more than anything he was just devastated that Ludwig could say such things.

Ludwig's eyes softened. They seemed suddenly hollow. He took a step backwards, his gaze dropping unfocused, unseeing, to the ground. "I should have guessed. Should have known. Why else would you spend your days with me? Why else would an Italian waste his time on a German?"

Feliciano wanted to scream that it was because he loved Ludwig. Because he'd never loved anyone like him before, because all he had ever wanted from the moment he'd first seen Ludwig standing in the sun and looking down at him with those piercing blue eyes was to hold him, to be with him, to never let him go. But Feliciano could not answer the question. He could not form the words. He could barely breathe through his tears. *No.* It was all he could think, over and over, too distraught to feel ashamed of his wracking sobs. *No. No, don't think this… no, don't leave me… no, no, no…* He managed to whisper it finally. "No."

Uncertainty flickered in Ludwig's eyes. He looked briefly unsure, conflicted. But then he closed his eyes and turned his head. All traces of anger were gone from his face. He just

looked devastated. He took another step backwards. "Leave, Italian. Immediately. You are a traitor and an enemy. Never come near me again." Then he turned away.

Feliciano felt sick from the pain. He could not draw enough air into his lungs, could not think through the terror crowding his mind, could not hear past the blood rushing in his ears. And Ludwig just kept walking away.

Feliciano felt himself breaking apart. He shook his head, gasped for air, did not know what to do. Fear threatened to engulf him. Panic started to set in. Not like this, his mind kept screaming. Not like this. He reached out for Ludwig desperately, forced himself to speak. "Ludwig, please!" He screamed. "PLEASE!"

But this time, Ludwig did not turn back. The pain in his chest forced Feliciano to his knees.

Thunder crashed overhead. Rain poured in torrents as the black skies finally opened.

Feliciano did not notice.

To be continued...

Chapter 9

Feliciano knew, somewhere in the back of his grief stricken mind, that he had to get up. He had to get up from where he knelt on the wet ground, had to go home, had to tell his brother and his grandfather that he had betrayed them. He had to go and face his fate. Feliciano knew he had to get up - but it was impossible to move, the rain and his grief and the whole world crushing him down. It was impossible to move when all he wanted was to lie in the cold, drenching downpour until he no longer felt anything at all.

A massive crack of thunder tore through the sky, but Feliciano did not jump. Instead he smiled to himself as he remembered Lovino's threat. The thunder sounded like a gunshot. Finally Feliciano forced himself to his feet, shaking the rain and the tears from his eyes. He could not make things right again. He could not undo what he had done. But he could damn well face the consequences.

The lights were on ahead as Feliciano walked up the narrow lane to his house. He could not bring himself to run. He was still dazed, still numb. He had destroyed everything the resistance had worked towards, everything they had risked and lost their lives for. He had put Lovino and Grandpa and Antonio, the people he cared most about in the entire world, in serious danger. Because of him the Germans would know about the landing, because of him the whole plan was ruined. But what did any of that matter. Ludwig thought he was an enemy who had been working against him. Ludwig hated him. Feliciano stumbled on the road and almost fell. The wind-blown rain blinded him. But he didn't care. He would never see Ludwig again. Nothing meant anything anymore. All he could do was confess what he had done, and accept the inevitable result.

Feliciano called out as soon as he pushed through the front door. "Lovino? Grandpa? I need to speak to..." He broke off abruptly. Antonio backed away from Lovino so quickly he stumbled over a chair and crashed backwards into the wall. Lovino practically fell off the table before straightening up and glaring angrily, his face red and his breathing heavy.

"Feliciano! You should knock before..." Lovino blinked as he took in Feliciano's soaking clothes and tear stained face. His glare quickly disappeared. "Feliciano?"

Faced with his brother's concerned expression, his worried eyes, all of Feliciano's resolve melted to nothing. He ran across the room and threw his arms around Lovino. For just one moment, before he destroyed everything, before Lovino found out what he had done and hated him forever, Feliciano wanted to hold his brother one last time. Lovino slowly placed his arms around Feliciano. "Feli, you're scaring me. What's wrong?" Feliciano tried to answer but could not speak through his sobs. Lovino sighed softly. "You went to see him, didn't you?" Feliciano could only nod. Lovino rubbed his back gently. "I'm sorry, Feli, I really..."

"I'm so sorry, Lovino." Feliciano whispered it, almost unconsciously, so softly he was not sure Lovino had heard him. But Lovino immediately froze in Feliciano's hold. After a long, deafening, terrible silence, Lovino slowly grasped Feliciano's shoulders and pushed him away to arms length. He looked terrified.

"Sorry?" Feliciano could hear the suppressed fear and apprehension in Lovino's voice. "Sorry for what?"

Feliciano reluctantly broke out of Lovino's grasp and backed up into the table behind him. How was he ever going to say this? How was he supposed to tell his brother that he had betrayed him, betrayed the Resistance, betrayed his country? His eyes flicked briefly to Antonio who stood silent, still, watching him with worried eyes. Feliciano tried to prepare himself to break his world apart. He lowered his head and whispered the words. "I told him."

Silence. The room was thick with it. It was accusing him, crushing him. It lasted far too long. Terrified, Feliciano forced himself to look up at Lovino. Feliciano had seen his brother angry. It was a pretty common occurrence, after all. He'd seen him livid with wrath and white with boiling rage. And yet he had never seen him like this. Like he was at the very edge of fury, like it was taking Lovino every ounce of willpower to keep from exploding.

"You told him." Feliciano just nodded. "Do you… have any idea… what you have done?" The words were low and seemed controlled, but Feliciano knew better. Lovino was hanging on by a thread.

"I'm sorry," Feliciano whispered again, gripping onto the table behind him with sweating hands.

"I let you go to him, Feliciano." Lovino looked at a loss to understand, to believe. His eyes flashed wildly. "I let you go! I knew you loved him but I never thought... I never believed you would betray us! Betray your country, your blood! NEVER!" Feliciano flinched at the sudden shout. Lovino's face twisted in barely contained fury. "Do you know how long we worked on this? Do you know what people went through to manage this? This was our chance! Our chance to get the Germans out! And you've RUINED EVERYTHING!" Just when it looked like Lovino was about to lose control, Antonio placed a hand calmly on his shoulder. Lovino turned and kicked the wall, letting out a frustrated shout. Feliciano flinched again, tears sliding silently down his cheeks. He had never felt so guilty in his life.

Antonio pulled out a chair and pressed Feliciano gently into it before kneeling before him. "Lovino told me about your German friend, Feli." His voice was kind but serious.

"Oh." Feliciano almost wasn't surprised. He still glared sideways at Lovino. "You promised."

"I promised not to tell Grandpa… an enormous mistake, obviously!" Lovino looked like he was about to kick the wall again, but when Antonio shook his head Lovino just put his head in his hands and turned away.

"Okay, Feli." Antonio fixed Feliciano's eyes in an intent stare. Feliciano did not think he could look away. "First of all, tell me what you do with this German soldier."

"He's a pilot," said Feliciano softly.

"All right, this pilot. What has he… has he ever…" Antonio scratched his head, looking uncomfortable and hesitant. "What do you… do, together? Exactly?"

"Well, we talk. And go walking. And he's teaching me to speak German, but I'm not very good at remembering it, not as good as he is at remembering Italian, only he always pronounces the words wrong. And we pick flowers and we laugh and we sing. Well, I do. Oh, and the other day we played soccer. I won." Feliciano smiled sadly and tried not to break to pieces when he thought of all the things he would never do with Ludwig again.

"And that's it? That's all? He just… talks to you?"

Feliciano was not sure what Antonio thought he would say. "What else would he do?"

"Nothing," Antonio replied quickly. "Good, right. Now, this morning." Feliciano winced as reality set in again. "What exactly did you tell him, Feli?"

Feliciano felt ashamed and embarrassed as he answered. "I'm sorry. I told him about the Americans landing tomorrow. About the attack during the meeting. And he… he… he knows I am in the resistance."

Antonio closed his eyes briefly. Feliciano could almost see everything fall apart behind them. A horrible aching shame gnawed at his gut. "All right, okay. And does he know of our meeting place in the cantina?"

"No, I never mentioned it."

"Does he know where you live?"

"Not exactly."

Antonio nodded and took a deep breath. "Feliciano, this is very important." He almost looked scared to ask the question. "Did you ever tell this German your surname?"

Feliciano hung his head. He knew his answer would not be the one Antonio wanted to hear. "Yes."

Antonio's shoulders stiffened and his voice rose in increasing intensity. "Does he know Lovi... I mean, does he know you have a brother? And, and a grandfather? Does he know their names?"

Feliciano responded in a very small voice. "Yes. But, but it doesn't matter, because he won't hurt them…"

"Lovino, we have to get you away from the village." Antonio's voice was frantic as he rose hastily to his feet.

Lovino shook his head, glaring down at Feliciano. His anger seemed to have settled slightly, but still looked ready to flare at any moment. "No. I can't leave. Where would I go? Besides, if this German is what Feliciano says he is, we are not in any danger. And if he's not… well, let the bastard try and take us."

Antonio actually laughed, though it was slightly hysterical. "Lovino, listen to me. This is no time to be brave. Do you know what the Germans do to resistance members? You have to get

away, now, both of you!"

"What do you think, Feliciano?" Lovino raised his chin defiantly, provokingly. "This German of yours. Will he have us arrested? Should we run? You said he was a good man. But how much do you trust him?"

"I trust him." Feliciano knew as he said it how true it was. After everything, Feliciano still knew that Ludwig was a good man. "He will not arrest us. I swear it."

Antonio grasped Lovino's arms and forced him to face him. "Lovino, please. What they would do to you…" He broke off, shuddered, and pulled Lovino closer. "You don't understand, I've seen it, and I will die a thousand deaths if they do that to you. You must leave. We can not take the chance."

"Feliciano seems to think we should."

Lovino's eyes bore into his, and Feliciano realised. If he was wrong - if Ludwig informed his unit of Feliciano's affiliations with the resistance, if Lovino and Grandpa Roma were arrested and tortured and executed - it would be his fault. But Ludwig would not do that. Even if he thought Feliciano was an enemy, even if he thought Feliciano had been using him for information, even if he hated Feliciano for it - Feliciano knew Ludwig. And Ludwig would never turn anyone over to the Gestapo. "Believe me," he said resolutely. "Ludwig will not have us arrested."

Antonio suddenly paused. He turned his head slowly and looked curiously at Feliciano. "You said your German was a pilot?"

"Yes."

"And his name is Ludwig?"

Feliciano nodded, surprised by Antonio's peculiar tone. "Yes, that's right."

Antonio's eyebrows knitted together. "What is his surname?"

Feliciano thought briefly about not answering. But it could not do any more harm – Ludwig was on that list anyway. "Beilschmidt. Ludwig Beilschmidt. He's a Lieutenant."

Antonio's mouth dropped open. He looked stunned, then completely bewildered, then oddly amused. He eventually let out a deep breath before suddenly bursting into a fit of laughter. Feliciano blinked in confusion for a few moments before looking over to Lovino, who just shook his head at Antonio.

"You crazy bastard."

Antonio just kept laughing, relief evident in his face, in his bright eyes. He clutched his stomach. "I need to sit down," he panted. He almost collapsed into a chair, his face white and wide eyed and slightly shocked.

"You crazy, crazy bastard," said Lovino again. "Have you finally cracked?"

"You aren't in any danger." Antonio fought to gain control of his laughter. He gasped for breath a few times then shook his head and wiped his eyes. He still looked a little baffled, but reassured and almost calm. "The Germans will be prepared for the landing, however. And we do not have a way to warn the Americans this late."

"What does that mean?" Feliciano asked softly, still confused and slightly stunned by Antonio's strange reaction.

"It means things are going to get a little messy." Antonio sighed and ran a hand over his forehead. "And it means we have to tell your Grandpa."

Feliciano felt the blood drain from his face. He clutched his stomach, afraid he would be sick. "What… what will you tell him, exactly?" Feliciano tried not to panic.

"I'll try to leave some things out. But he has to know about this, Feli."

Feliciano's blood ran cold. "He'll kill me."

"No he won't." Antonio smiled kindly, and Feliciano was surprised by how much that hurt. He did not deserve that smile.

"Well he should. I betrayed him. I betrayed everyone. I'm just a traitor, I deserve to be shot, you said it Lovino, you said you would kill me if I betrayed Italy so please just do it, do it because there's nothing left now anyway!" Feliciano choked back a sob. Guilt flooded him once again. How many people would die because of him? What had he done by warning Ludwig, warning the Germans? What would Grandpa Roma think, what would he do? And again Feliciano wondered what it mattered. What any of it mattered. Because Ludwig was gone. Forever. Feliciano could not hold back the sobs anymore. He stood, kicking the chair behind him as he did. He clenched his fists, steeling himself. "Please, Lovino. Please just kill me."

Lovino stepped towards him and for a brief second Feliciano's heart leapt terrified to his throat. But Lovino just shook his head, his expression softened, and tears appeared in his eyes. "Don't be stupid, Feli." Then he pulled Feliciano fiercely into his arms. "As if I ever could."

Feliciano clung to Lovino and cried. Because his brother loved him despite everything. Because of the people who would be hurt because of his betrayal. Because he could not bear to think what Grandpa Roma would do when he heard. And because, even after everything, Feliciano did not regret what he had told Ludwig.

Feliciano sat crouched against his bedroom wall. He winced at every shout, every crash, every thud that resounded through the walls from the kitchen where Antonio spoke with Grandpa Roma. Feliciano did not know what to do. There was nothing he could do. He clutched his arms around himself and focused on breathing evenly. The yelling and shouting seemed to last forever. It wasn't until well after it had finally stopped that Feliciano could bring himself to move. He slowly got to his feet and carefully, hesitantly, made his way into the hall. He stopped as he entered the front room. Lovino stood at the open front door, staring

out down the road, the afternoon sky dark and pouring and filled with lightning. It took Feliciano a few seconds to notice that Lovino was crying.

"Lovino? Has Antonio left?"

Lovino jumped and turned at Feliciano's voice. He wiped his eyes hurriedly, then shrugged and laughed awkwardly. "I'm such a coward, Feliciano."

Feliciano shrugged and smiled cautiously back. "Without fear, there can be no courage. Ludwig told me that."

Lovino paused, then looked from Feliciano to the road outside. "Just because I love you does not mean I have forgiven you, Feli."

"I know."

"You really risked everything for this German, didn't you?"

"I didn't have a choice. I love him."

Lovino nodded, his eyes hardening resolutely. "I think I need to..." He let out a deep breath. He seemed to have come to a decision. "I have to go." Lovino ran out into the rain without a backwards glance.

Feliciano watched him go, a strange sense of torn happiness and unfamiliar jealousy warring in his chest. And at the same time he felt an uneasiness growing in his stomach. He looked warily at the kitchen door. Lovino had not killed him. Grandpa Roma would not kill him. But Feliciano had never been so scared to see his Grandpa in his life. Regardless, he forced himself to walk into the kitchen, opening the door with slow and shaking hands.

"Grandpa?"

Roma sat at the kitchen table, his back to Feliciano. He did not respond.

"Grandpa?" Feliciano asked again, pleadingly. Roma raised a hand to quiet him, but he did not turn.

"Not now."

"Grandpa, please… please say something." *Please say it's all right.* Feliciano wanted to beg. He wanted to beg his Grandpa to hold him and sing to him and chase the monsters away, the way he always could when Feliciano was little and lost and scared, back when Grandpa Roma was stronger than anything else in the whole wide world and he knew how to make everything in the world all right again.

"You want me to say something?" Roma's voice was unlike Feliciano had ever heard it. Not angry, not sad, not disappointed. Just flat and empty. "Fine, I'll say something, Feliciano. Today, for the first time in my life, I am glad that my daughter is dead. Because if she could see what her son has become, she would die of shame."

Feliciano reeled like he had been slapped. His heart froze in his chest. He felt shaken, weak, as though his blood had been drained. He could not breathe from the shock of his Grandpa saying something like that to him. It was too much. It was all suddenly too much. Ludwig hated him. Lovino would never forgive him. And now the one person in the world he thought would always love him and protect him from everything had just torn his heart out. Feliciano felt accused, guilty, ashamed, hated. He could not bear it anymore. He almost did not notice as Roma started to turn.

"Wait, please, Feli, I didn't…"

Feliciano ignored him. He did the only thing he could think of to do. He ran out of the kitchen, out of the house, and out into the storm.

To be continued...

Chapter 10

Feliciano ran down the dirt track, onto the road and into the field. Lightning streaked the dark sky and thunder crashed loudly, almost deafening as it echoed between the mountains. In only seconds Feliciano was soaked through by the pouring rain, but he barely noticed. All he could feel was an aching throb in his chest, a hopeless despair that threatened to crush him, the brief warmth on his cheeks before his tears turned cold with the freezing wind. But he did not stop. He couldn't. He couldn't see how anything could ever be all right again and he just wanted to run, to run far away. To run somewhere there was no Germany and no England and no Italy, where there was no one to hate and no one to fight. Somewhere sides did not exist and he could lie in green fields with Ludwig, picking flowers and laughing and playing soccer and sitting hand in hand against an oak tree beneath a golden sun. One of their places where they could be somewhere else. But this was the world, and this was war, and Ludwig was gone. He was gone, and Feliciano would never have that somewhere else, and he wanted to fall down and scream from the pain of it.

Feliciano ran past the familiar burnt out tank and realised with a jolt that he had been running to the oak tree this entire time. He headed towards it, unable to turn away, unable to think of anywhere else in the entire world that he needed to be right now. He wanted that place, wanted the memories and the joy and the pain and everything, all of it, because it was all he had left. But as he drew closer to the tree he noticed, through the rain and his tears, with a clenching pull to his chest, that someone was standing beneath it. He did not dare to think. He did not dare to hope. Feliciano could not see properly through the dark and the rain but as he slowed down to a hesitant walk his body thrummed with a burning, pounding, inevitable beat. And then he stopped. The thunder could have come crashing down around him and he would not have noticed. Because nothing else existed. Because Ludwig was standing there, as though nothing had ever happened, as though this was any other beautiful afternoon spent forgetting the world and meeting under their oak tree. When everything finally came back, when Feliciano could feel his flashing heartbeat lurch in his chest, he ran. So did Ludwig. And they did not stop until they reached each other.

"I'm sorr..." but Feliciano did not finish the sentence because Ludwig grasped his waist, pulled him close, and with a shuddering gasp he desperately pressed his lips to Feliciano's.

And then it didn't matter. Sides, and countries, and loyalties, and all of those unimportant things. What anyone else had said; what anyone else thought. None of it mattered. Everything was all right now. Feliciano's heart soared with joy, every aching pang of grief and sorrow washed away by this moment. Because Ludwig was with him, was kissing him, was holding him like he was all that existed in the entire world.

Feliciano didn't know how long they stayed like that, lips sliding on rain soaked skin, hands clutching each other like if they let go they would fall. And he didn't know how to breathe or to move or to think and he didn't know if he was crying or laughing or both. Finally their lips parted and Ludwig gasped, ran a shaking hand over Feliciano's cheek. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Feliciano…"

"You were never a mission!" Feliciano cried immediately, desperate to make Ludwig hear him this time. "I was never working against you, the resistance had nothing to do…"

Ludwig shook his head, almost laughing. "Oh God, Feliciano, I know that! I was stunned, and I was stupid, how could I ever think that…"

"It doesn't matter," Feliciano gasped, whispered, laughed, shouted joyfully. He couldn't even tell.

"I didn't mean those things." Ludwig touched both his hands to Feliciano's cheeks. His eyes were as dark as the sky, his cheeks wet with the rain. "Please forgive me for saying them. I would never hurt you, or your family. I would never let anyone hurt you."

Feliciano nodded, unsure how to handle the stunning happiness that flooded his veins, his heart, his head. "I know! I know, Ludwig, and it doesn't matter now, just… just tell me I'm not dreaming, and that you're here, and…"

"I'm here, Feliciano. I'm here with you."

Feliciano laughed in relief and reached up for Ludwig, for his lips, his hands, for all of him, to feel him and know this was real. It did not feel like only one afternoon they had been separated, and it was impossible to believe that only moments ago the world had been ending when now it was bright and beautiful and made whole again. It felt like a second, like a lifetime before they broke the kiss for air, laughing and panting and staring in disbelief. "But why are you here, Ludwig?" Feliciano ran his hands over Ludwig's chest, tried to convince himself he wasn't dreaming. It was too hard to believe. "What are you doing out here in the storm?"

"I didn't know where else to go. I got to my base and I realised that I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life. I turned around and came back, right after..." Ludwig choked off, then recovered to deliver the words evenly. "After I informed my General of the attack tomorrow." Feliciano's blistering happiness tainted just slightly. But he had expected it.

"I know you had to tell them, Ludwig. Because you're good, and you're fair, and you would not let them be attacked unknowingly. And you love your country."

"I'd let it burn for you," Ludwig whispered, then kissed him again, deep and thorough and searing, until Feliciano forgot about feeling anything but uncontainable joy once again. He didn't even notice the rain or the gusting wind or the crashing thunder until he started shivering and Ludwig gently pulled away. "You should not be outside in this freezing rain."

Feliciano felt a brief flash of panic. Ludwig could not leave him again... He grasped Ludwig's hand and pulled before Ludwig had time to suggest it. "Come on."

To Feliciano's relief, Ludwig followed easily, without a moments hesitation. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere out of this rain!" Feliciano laughed.

"But where can we possibly…"

"Follow me, I know a place."

They ran through the freezing wind and pouring rain, Feliciano leading, his heart pounding and his head spinning, his every thought and feeling tied to the touch of Ludwig's hand clasped in his. He squeezed it, glanced up at Ludwig to make sure this was real, and laughed joyfully when Ludwig squeezed back, smiling.

Feliciano had not been there for years, but he found his way to the old barn on the edge of the field easily. It was barely used these days except for storage, but there was not much left after years of war. Feliciano pushed open the creaky door and they both raced in, grateful, out of the storm. Feliciano shook the rain from his face and hair, not releasing Ludwig's hand, and glanced around the musty barn. The place was almost silent but for the pounding of the rain on the roof. Only a trickle of afternoon light seeped through from outside, just enough to make out the low hay-covered bunk cut below the wooden hayloft, the racks of wine and olive oil stacked in shelves, the old fireplace against the wall. Ludwig raised his eyebrows, quite taken aback. "Uh... there's a... why is there a fireplace in this barn?"

Feliciano shrugged. "Grandpa built this place, years ago. He said he spent some of the best nights of his life in here. He says if it wasn't for this barn Lovino and I wouldn't be here. I really don't know why, I mean, it's just a barn. But at least it's dry!" Feliciano shivered violently and Ludwig rubbed his arms briskly.

"*Gott*, you're so cold. Will this old fireplace work? Is there firewood in here anywhere?"

"I think it will work... gosh, I hope it will work. There's some wood by the wall there."

Ludwig walked to the fireplace and swiftly got to work with the kindling and firewood while mumbling to himself, something that sounded like, "A fireplace in a barn, these mad Italians..."

Feliciano shivered again and immediately started removing his soaking clothes. There was no way they were going to dry on his body, and he was freezing. He took off his jacket carefully, disappointed that he had managed to ruin both his jackets today. He had only swapped them this afternoon after soaking his other in the rain that morning. As he slipped it over his shoulders he felt something in the inner pocket brush his hand. He reached in curiously and his eyes widened when he realised what it was. The photographs he had taken with Ludwig, the ones Lovino had noticed in the cellar. He remembered thrusting them into his pocket when Grandpa Roma had entered the room... he hadn't even thought of them since. They were relatively unscathed from the rain, just a bit wet, so Feliciano placed them on a shelf above the olive oil to dry and draped his wet jacket over an old barrel.

Feliciano started unhooking his braces as he looked over at Ludwig by the fireplace. He had started the fire so quickly; he was obviously used to it, but then of course, it was so cold in Germany. Ludwig closed the screen, the fire already crackling and flaring. He stood, brushing off his hands. "There, that should warm..." Ludwig broke off as he turned around, his eyes widening in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking my clothes off!"

Ludwig looked like he could not think of a single way to respond to that. He just gaped for a few moments before managing to choke out, "Why?"

Feliciano furrowed his eyebrows. Wasn't it obvious... "Because they are wet, and I am cold. Here, you have to take yours off too." He stepped towards Ludwig and started unbuttoning his grey military jacket. Ludwig looked too shocked to stop him.

"How many of them?" His voice was slightly panicked.

"All of them! Or else you will freeze and then you'll catch a cold and then you'll die and I will be very, very, very sad." Feliciano slid Ludwig's jacket over his shoulders before pulling his own shirt over his head. Ludwig just stared. "Now sit down and take your boots off or your feet will get cold."

"Oh. Oh, all right..." Ludwig sat on the hay covered bunk, slightly dazed, and Feliciano flopped down beside him and started pulling off his own boots. Mad, delirious happiness still flooded his veins and he felt like he could start laughing at any moment. And yet he was also oddly nervous, almost excited, his heart thundering madly and his stomach twisting strangely, pleasantly. Unsure of this nervous feeling, Feliciano just kept talking as he and Ludwig both kicked off their boots, the growing fire starting to warm their skin.

"You don't want to get frostbite because then you'll lose your toes and you won't be able to walk and I'll have to push you around in a wheelchair, not that I'd mind, of course. Only there's a lot of hills around here and I don't know if I could push you all the way to town every day. Here, Ludwig, your shirt is soaked through..." Feliciano reached up for Ludwig's shirt, unbuttoned it past the iron cross at his neck, down his chest, then finally slid it over his shoulders and down his arms. Then Feliciano paused. For a moment he just looked, his breath coming faster, the nervous twisting in his stomach shooting up his spine. "Oh." He tried to swallow but found his throat was dry. Ludwig's broad chest was sculpted with muscle, his golden skin still wet from the rain and glistening in the light of the fire. Without thinking, Feliciano reached out and ran his fingertips down Ludwig's firm, warm, muscular chest. It rose and fell rapidly beneath his hand, then Ludwig's breath caught as he unexpectedly took Feliciano by the waist and brought their bare chests together. Feliciano gasped then moaned, placed his hands on Ludwig's huge upper arms, then bit his lip to control another broken sound rising in his throat. He suddenly felt almost shy and looked down, surprised by the unfamiliar feeling. Ludwig placed a kiss gently against his cheek.

"How... how do you say 'kiss me' in Italian?" Feliciano turned his head to find Ludwig staring intently, his blue eyes sparkling in the firelight, and Feliciano's pounding heart fluttered to his throat. Their lips were so close... He swallowed a few times before he could answer.

"*Baciami,"* he whispered.

"*Baciami,*" Ludwig repeated dutifully. Feliciano laughed softly. His pronunciation was still terrible.

"*Küss mich,"* he whispered back against Ludwig's cheek. Their lips met at first hesitantly, gently, then the kiss quickly grew stronger and deeper. Feliciano's hands grew bolder as well, roaming over Ludwig's large arms and chest, then he breathed in sharply when Ludwig lay him back and settled over him, firm and reassuringly heavy. When their skin met again Feliciano felt it like an electrical charge, his chest full to overflowing. Their earlier kisses had been brief, stolen. But now there was nothing but a warming fire and the rain on the roof and Ludwig and the entire night before them. Everything was too perfect, too incredible. Ludwig's skin was so warm, the smell of him so vivid and intoxicating, the sound of his heavy breathing making Feliciano's heart soar. Feliciano slowly realised Ludwig was shaking slightly. "Are you still cold?" he asked, concerned.

"No."

"Are you scared of the thunder? It's all right, Ludwig, I'll protect you." Ludwig laughed quietly against his ear and kissed him again. Feliciano did not know what to do with this happiness. It was almost too much to bear. He pressed closer, leant into Ludwig's touch, ran his hands down Ludwig's back, and realised... "You need to take your trousers off as well."

Ludwig immediately froze, his expression torn between apprehension and surprise, his eyes bright with desire. "I don't know if that is a very good idea."

Feliciano looked up very slowly, imploringly, his lip between his teeth. He twisted against Ludwig and whispered breathily. "I think it's a very good idea."

Once again, Ludwig looked at a complete and utter loss for words. "I... oh. I... you mean..."

Feliciano nodded, for once not sure how to put into words what he wanted. He didn't know much about it, but he knew what lovers did together, and he knew he wanted to feel Ludwig everywhere. Beautiful Ludwig who was so strong, so enticing, so handsome and bright and wonderful that Feliciano just wanted to be closer, wanted to be as close as possible. Feliciano tried to find the words. "You and me, together..." He thrust up his hips and Ludwig stifled a groan. "Like this."

Feliciano did not give Ludwig time to comprehend before he fumbled at Ludwig's cold, heavy belt buckle. It took only seconds for Ludwig to reach down and help, until they both managed to peel off their still slightly damp trousers, then gasped and clutched each other when their bare hips met. The feeling shot through Feliciano like a lightning strike. It was a few moments before he could speak. "Have you... done it before?" Feliciano suddenly found himself completely, irrationally angry at the idea of Ludwig being with anyone else like this.

It took Ludwig longer to respond. Sweat was beading on his brow. "No," he said shakily. "But I've..." He trailed into a mumble. "Read about it…"

"Oh!" said Feliciano in understanding. "Lovino and I found some books like that under Grandpa's bed once. Lovino couldn't look Grandpa in the eye for a month. Did your books have pictures of naked ladies as well?"

Ludwig's face turned red, his eyes wide and panicked. "No! *Gott*, no, nothing like that, that's not what I mean, I'm talking about something else entirely…"

Feliciano giggled. "It's okay, Ludwig." He kissed Ludwig steadily, pushed his hips against Ludwig's, tried to convince him without words.

Ludwig broke the kiss, gasping, then swallowed heavily, almost a gulp. "Do you know what this means..." He looked like he didn't quite know the way to frame the question. "I'm sorry, I mean, do you understand how..."

Feliciano let his thighs part, and brought one leg up over Ludwig's side. He stared into Ludwig's wide eyes and whispered, "This means you'll be inside me, right?" Ludwig did not move. Feliciano wondered briefly if he should remind him to breathe. "Um... Ludwig?"

"*JA*… um, I mean, yes, I…" Ludwig coughed nervously. Feliciano bit back another giggle. "We'll need something," said Ludwig quickly.

Feliciano tilted his head. "Something?"

"To make it… easier… um.." Ludwig looked down. Feliciano had never heard him so uncertain. It was rather adorable. "Some sort of cream, or oil, or…"

"Oh, I know!" Feliciano rolled over from under Ludwig and reached up into the rows of storage. He took down a bottle of olive oil then sat back onto the bunk and handed it to Ludwig. "Here."

Ludwig raised an eyebrow. "Olive oil. There is olive oil stored right next to a bed of hay, by a fireplace, in a barn. Mad Italians." Feliciano could not respond before Ludwig pulled him into a kiss and pressed him back into the hay. And then Ludwig took over, his hands and lips and breath, and Feliciano just leant into it, fell into it. This was closer than he had ever dreamt of, and more than he had ever imagined. Ludwig grew more certain with every second, and Feliciano moaned as he thrust up against him, a craving building uncontrollably in his chest and spreading everywhere, everywhere Ludwig touched with those warm, strong, still slightly shaking hands.

The pain was nothing, not after the unbearable agony he had already been through. Because this was Ludwig, and this was everything, and it just melted into the perfect and indescribable feeling of Ludwig's large, warm body against his, Ludwig pressing against him, *into* him, and it was all so incredible and stunning that Feliciano could not stop the tears which rose to his eyes.

"Are you all right?" asked Ludwig, his face suddenly concerned even as he struggled to keep his breathing even.

"Yes," whispered Feliciano, clutching Ludwig's arms to try and make him move. "Oh, yes…"

"Am I hurting you?" Ludwig's arms shook as he held himself still.

"No, no it's fine..." Ludwig moved, Feliciano gasped, and Ludwig froze completely.

"Sorry, I'm sorry! Are you..."

"Ludwig, shush." Feliciano reached up and kissed him, wrapped his legs around his waist, pulled him in. Ludwig gasped, shuddering, against his lips.

"Ah, *Gott*, Feliciano..."

Feliciano had never imagined such feelings, such sensations. Like he was being surrounded by Ludwig, lost in him, like the world had shrunk until it contained nothing but this small corner of it, this single moment. And it felt so good inside him, and all through him, and Ludwig's face was so beautiful in the light of the fire that Feliciano had to reach up and touch it.

Feliciano ran his hands over Ludwig's chest and shoulders, thrilling in the feel of the hard muscle working under soft golden skin. Sweat rose to Ludwig's brow and his eyes remained fixed on Feliciano's, as though he could not look away. Feliciano's skin burned where Ludwig trailed a hand down his side and over his hip, and he gasped when Ludwig slid it between them, then shuddered and cried out as it closed around him. A sharp pulsing pleasure throbbed between his legs, in his hips, his thighs, his spine, greater than anything he'd ever felt by his own hand in dark early hours under the blanket, alone. "Ludwig," he panted breathlessly. "Feels so good..."

Feliciano never wanted it to end, but it couldn't last… nothing this perfect could last. He spiralled closer as Ludwig moved faster, whispering his name, and this tightening pulse grew uncontrollably, inevitably… "Oh... Ludwig, I... oh..." Then it all sharpened, fell, climaxed; in his stomach, his head, everywhere, and he cried out from the intense bright bliss of it.

Ludwig gasped against his ear, hot and damp, then he shuddered and groaned. "Feliciano... *Ich liebe dich*." The words were so soft Feliciano was not sure if he was meant to hear them.

Feliciano panted for breath as he blinked away his tears, put his arms around Ludwig's neck and reached for his lips. They kissed slowly, chests rising and falling rapidly against each other. Then Ludwig rolled to his side and brought Feliciano into his arms, kissing his hair. "I love you too," said Feliciano, throwing his arm over Ludwig, nuzzling into him. He felt Ludwig smile against his forehead.

Their hands met between their chests, fingers twisting together. Feliciano knew then that this was what mattered, that this was what life was lived for, and that if only everyone could feel like this there would be no such things as war and hatred and killing. There was no need to speak, no need to do anything but lie in each others arms and feel each other breathe. And Feliciano was not sure if he dozed off, but it didn't matter, because when he opened his eyes again Ludwig was still here, still here with him. The fire still blazed and it was so warm now, even though he could hear the howling wind and thunder and rain outside. But none of that could touch him when he was lying like this in Ludwig's arms, safe from everything. But there were still some things no one was strong enough to control...

"What will happen tomorrow?" Feliciano spoke finally, not wanting to break this golden moment, but unable to stop himself asking. Ludwig took a deep breath before answering.

"The Americans will attack. But we will be ready for them. And it will be a fair fight... not an ambush in the dark."

"Are their pilots... very good? Better than you?"

"They are good." Ludwig gave a tiny smirk. "But not better than me. A Mustang is no match for a Messerschmitt." Feliciano nodded, satisfied Ludwig was telling the truth. Because no one could be better than Ludwig, at anything. No American could beat Ludwig. Feliciano smiled against Ludwig's chest, then laughed softly. Ludwig raised his head slightly, curiously.

"Did you ever think, on the first day we met, on the road, that we would end up like this?"

"The first day we met." Ludwig smiled thoughtfully, and his face brightened. His normally neat, slicked back hair fell messy in his bright eyes, and Feliciano stared, heart skipping, trying to imprint the image on his memory. "That was the first day I had walked this far out into the countryside. I remember it clearly... I was so tired, and drained, and sick of everything. Every day, the same hell. It was as though I was seeing everything in black and white. But then you arrived from no where, and you looked up, and you spoke, and you smiled, and everything burst into colour again." For a moment Ludwig's eyes were as blue as they had been on that sunny day they had first met. Feliciano wondered if he had fallen in love the moment he saw them. "You make the world beautiful again." Ludwig looked away shyly and Feliciano almost had to suppress a joyful laugh as the happiness inside him threatened to overflow. "The next day I wandered out here again, just hoping to see you. I think I loved you already. And the whole time we met I never dreamt... never dared to hope you would feel the same. Never imagined I could deserve that."

Feliciano's chest felt tight, his heart so full. Ludwig had never spoken so openly, and Feliciano felt so amazed that he could make someone like Ludwig open his soul for him. He kissed his shoulder. "Ludwig." He wished there was something he could do, something he could say to respond. But how could he ever put his overwhelming feelings into words like that? If only there was something he could give Ludwig... then he remembered with a jolt. "Oh, I forgot!" Feliciano pushed himself up and took the two photographs down from the bench above them. "Here," he said, settling on his stomach beside Ludwig and placing the photographs before them. They had dried completely. "Do you remember the photographs we took? Up on the hill?"

"Of course." Ludwig ran his fingers carefully over the photograph of Feliciano smiling cheerfully at the camera, Ludwig's grey jacket over his shoulders.

"Now you can have one of me, and I can have one of you! You're supposed to smile in photographs, but that's all right, you look very handsome, anyway. Oh, you should write something on the back of it, my name or something, you're supposed to do that with photographs, and the place, and the date too, I think it was the twenty… where did you get a pen?"

"My shirt pocket."

Feliciano raised his eyebrows. "You have a pen in your pocket?"

"Of course. You never know when you might need one."

"Gosh, you carry the strangest things in your pockets, Ludwig. You don't have any more chocolate in there, do you?"

Ludwig's lips curled slightly. "No, sorry." He turned the photograph over and poised his pen over it. Then he paused.

Feliciano threw his arm around Ludwig's and leant against his shoulder. "What are you going to write?"

Ludwig's hand shook slightly, then he wrote slowly, carefully, in neat, angular script: two simple words. '**bella ciao**.' Feliciano couldn't help but laugh at that, even as the words pulled painfully at his chest. "You wrote it wrong, silly German."

Ludwig glanced at him sideways, a tiny smile on his lips. "No, I wrote it like the song. Bella ciao."

Feliciano smiled back then turned over the photograph of Ludwig. He took the pen from Ludwig and scrawled '*auf wiedersehen, sweetheart'* on the back. Then he looked down at the two photographs, side by side. Two goodbyes. Feliciano was so sick of saying goodbye. He closed his eyes and rolled over, again trying to hide himself in Ludwig's arms. The sound of the rain on the roof grew gradually softer, and the rumbling thunder came from far away. The only light now came from the dwindling fire, the night long since fallen. "Switzerland, Ludwig. I'd leave right now if you asked me. This second."

Ludwig's heartbeat sped up against Feliciano's ear, his breathing slightly uneven. When his voice came it was tinged with regret. "I have my duty. And what would your brother and grandfather say if you never came home?"

Feliciano squeezed his eyes shut painfully. He had expected the answer. But it still hurt. "They wouldn't care. They know I told you about the landings. They hate me now."

Ludwig ran a hand gently over Feliciano's back. "No. I am quite sure they don't."

"Things are going to change now, aren't they."

"Yes." Neither mentioned it, but Feliciano knew that Ludwig understood as well as he did. With the Americans landing, there was no way Ludwig could just walk out to the oak tree and meet him every day. They would be lucky enough to hold onto their base. "But this war will be over one day. And then, I'll come back for you."

"Yes, you will, or else I will come for you. I will, Ludwig, no matter how far I have to go, no matter how long it takes. I'll wait for you forever, remember? I'll see you again, Ludwig. I will. I'll see you again." Feliciano spoke firmly, determinedly, but with an edge of rising desperation. Ludwig touched his cheek and kissed him firmly.

"Yes. You'll see me again. Now don't think about that, Feliciano. Right now, I'm here with you." Feliciano nodded, tried to focus only on Ludwig here with him now, and not the

uncertainty that was to come. Because right now, Ludwig was here with him, and there was no one else, and this was one of their places where they were somewhere else. Feliciano pressed as close to Ludwig as he could, felt him and breathed him, tangled their legs together, ran his fingertips over his chest, his back, his shoulders, curled them in his golden hair. Feliciano sighed contentedly at the feel of Ludwig's fingers twisting in his own hair. "This one curl of yours." Ludwig's voice rumbled through his chest and against Feliciano's ear. "So strange. It never lies flat."

Feliciano smiled and tried to fight the inescapable drowsiness that washed over him. He wanted to stay awake with Ludwig for as long as he could, for as long as they had. But he also knew he did not want to watch Ludwig leave. He knew that it would break him, and he would never be able to breath again. "Will you do something for me?" asked Feliciano quietly, so quietly he was not sure Ludwig had heard. But then Ludwig squeezed his hand and whispered back.

"What would you like me to do?"

"Stay until I fall asleep. And don't say goodbye."

Ludwig's arms tightened around him in response. Feliciano clung to Ludwig, and to consciousness, but eventually, exhausted, he could not fight it any longer. He fell asleep, the gentle, tingling touch of Ludwig's fingers running through his hair, wondering how it was possible that this was the best, worst, happiest, saddest moment of his life.

To be continued...

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was not sure what woke him. It may have been the single ray of grey dawn light that drifted across his eyes, or the unfamiliar creaking of wooden beams, or the sudden cold that crept over his skin now that the fire had finally burnt out. All he knew, immediately, was that Ludwig was gone. He rolled over slowly into the empty space beside him and ran his hand over it. Feliciano had known he would wake like this. But he still felt empty, aching, cold, like half of him had been torn away. He rested his head against the hay, closed his eyes, and clutched at the last touch and memory of Ludwig. He was just drifting back to sleep when he heard the barn door creak open.

"Feliciano?"

Half insensible, Feliciano furrowed his brows in confusion. "Ludwig?" he mumbled. He turned slowly, drowsily, at the voice, then blinked the sleep out of his eyes. The cold morning came rushing in. "Grandpa?" Feliciano quickly looked down. Oh, thank goodness… he had his pants on.

"Feli, oh thank God, thank God!" Grandpa Roma ran across the room, dropped to his knees, and pulled Feliciano into a bruising hug. After a few stunned, baffled, rather uncomfortable moments, Feliciano lightly tapped Roma on the shoulder.

"Can't breathe."

Roma pulled back and Feliciano gulped for air. "I looked everywhere," gasped Roma. His eyes were red, his hair wild and uncombed. He looked exhausted. "I searched all night, everywhere, and I thought… I was almost sure… Oh, Feli, I'm so sorry." Roma pulled Feliciano into his arms again. "Are you all right, tell me you're all right!"

Feliciano was not sure what to say. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to react. But he was sad, and he was hurting, and this was his Grandpa, who always made those bad things go away. Feliciano breathed in relief and clung to Grandpa Roma, wanting to believe he could make everything all right again. "I'm all right, Grandpa. I thought you hated me."

"Never, Feli. Forgive me for saying such awful words. Forgive me for my moment of madness. If I hadn't found you… oh, God, if I hadn't found you…" Roma could not finish the sentence. And Feliciano was so tired of crying.

The morning sun filtered through the kitchen windows, bathing the small room in a familiar golden light. The storm had passed as though it had never been. Feliciano sat opposite Grandpa Roma, staring at his hands on the table, completely unsure how to act in this strange, unfamiliar situation. Roma did not seem angry, had been nothing but kind and concerned since they had walked home from the barn, but Feliciano knew that he had to be

furious. After what Feliciano had done by warning Ludwig, after the night he had spent away and Roma had spent looking for him, after the words Roma had spoken the afternoon before - how could Grandpa Roma be anything but angry?

"What did Antonio tell you?" asked Feliciano tremulously.

"He told me you have made friends with a German pilot. And that you informed him of the Americans landing tomorrow." Roma sounded too calm.

"I'm sorry Grandpa. I never wanted him to tell anyone, I was trying to stop him from going back to the base… I was only trying to save him, that's all, I wasn't trying to betray…"

"I know that, Feliciano." Feliciano looked back down at the table and waited for Roma to continue. He didn't.

"Have I ruined everything?"

"We've had to change plans. Hopefully… things will be all right." Feliciano nodded, realising that Roma was not going to tell him anymore than that. Feliciano wondered just how much he would be allowed to know from now on. "This German is more than a friend, isn't he?"

The question threw Feliciano off guard. His stomach turned cold. He gulped heavily and looked up slowly, wide eyed and scared. But Roma still did not look angry.

"I thought so. He must mean a lot to you to risk so much." Feliciano just nodded uncertainly. A heavy silence fell and again Feliciano waited, unsure what to expect, unsure what to do. Roma finally took a deep breath and smiled wistfully.

"Do you know, Feliciano, your grandmother was the most beautiful woman I have ever known in this world. Olive skin, thick black curls, the loveliest dark eyes I have ever seen. The instant I laid eyes on her, I knew I would never love another. I walked straight up to her, took her hand, and I asked her to marry me."

Feliciano's uneasiness was quickly forgotten. It had been a long time since Grandpa Roma had spoken of the past, and he always told the best stories. Feliciano brightened slightly and sat up eagerly. "Wow. And she said yes?"

"No. No, she punched me." Roma grinned and Feliciano laughed. "But I swore I would never give up. It took me a month. One month, can you believe it? I could have had any woman in Italy in a second. But, these stubborn Greeks. Her… it took a month."

"Did she love you then?"

"Yes. Very much." Roma's eyes unfocused slightly as he looked past Feliciano. "When she died in childbirth, I thought I would die with her. I wanted to." Roma sighed. "But I couldn't. I had the most beautiful baby girl in the world to look after."

Feliciano smiled. "Mama."

"Your grandmother, she was very much like Lovino. Your mother, though, was just like you." Roma's eyes brightened as he spoke. "I always said she was born with a paintbrush in her hand. So brilliant. And she could sing like an angel. And write, and draw, and talk to anyone about anything." Feliciano hung on every word. Grandpa Roma never spoke much of Feliciano's mother. It was always too painful. "She was the sunshine in my life. So happy, so cheerful… everyone who met her loved her instantly." Roma's expression darkened, his eyes hardened. "Including him."

"My father." Feliciano knew almost nothing about his father. Grandpa Roma did not speak of him.

"I begged her not to go away with him. She was so young. But she would not listen. I shouted, I yelled. And it was the last time I saw her." Feliciano could see the pain and regret still so fresh in Roma's eyes. "She was no older than you, Feliciano. No older than you when he left her alone and she could not live with the pain of it. When they brought me the news…" Roma shuddered and closed his eyes. Feliciano looked away for a few moments, his chest heavy. Roma breathed out, and continued. "When they brought me the news, for the second time in my life, I considered death. But once again, I had no choice. Because I was suddenly left with two tiny, perfect baby grandsons who had no one but me in all the world." Roma smiled again, softly, reflectively. "I know I probably didn't always do my best with you boys, but I tried. Maybe I always overprotected you – maybe I still do. But that is because I have always known that my heart can not take being shattered a third time."

Roma suddenly looked old, and tired, and defeated. When Feliciano was a child, Grandpa Roma was so big, so safe. He could chase away monsters and soothe away nightmares and protect Feliciano from anything. He could make everything better. But then the world changed and the monsters became real. Feliciano grew up and now he knew that it just wasn't possible for Grandpa Roma to protect him from everything, and that no one could make everything better. It was a hard thing to realise.

"Grandpa, I'm not Mama. And neither is Lovino. Just because she fell in love and went away doesn't mean we are going to do the same thing." It was obvious now just what Grandpa Roma's real problem with Antonio was. And also just how much Feliciano would hurt him if he ever did just leave everything and run away to Switzerland. Feliciano felt guilty as he wondered whether that would be enough to stop him. But… "There are some things even you can't protect us from, Grandpa. And you can't stop us from falling in love."

"Feli, when did you grow up so much?" Roma sighed then shook his head as he looked up at Feliciano. "I don't understand you boys. When I was your age I had seven girlfriends." He grinned, and for a moment his eyes twinkled again. "One for every night of the week." Feliciano laughed, and Roma stood slowly and headed for the front room. For the first time Feliciano could remember, he almost looked his age. "Go get some sleep, Feliciano."

For the second time that day, Feliciano was not sure what woke him. At first he thought it must be the massive explosions that sounded far too close, or the low and steady roar of what sounded like a hundred planes flying overhead. But then he realised someone was screaming. Feliciano jumped out of bed and ran into the front room, his body reacting quicker than his

mind. When he got to the end of the hall, he staggered to a halt, fear rising immediately in his chest.

Lovino struggled desperately against Grandpa Roma's hold, his wide, red eyes fixed on the front door. A look of pure terror, of utter panic was etched on his face. It was like nothing Feliciano had seen; it struck him still and turned his blood cold. Roma struggled to hold Lovino against the wall. "Please stop, Lovino, you're going to hurt your..."

"NO! We have to go, we have to go now…" Lovino's voice was desperate, uncontrolled, and he thrashed, hysterical, in Roma's grip. Feliciano watched, too stunned to speak, an unreal dread swimming through his mind. Grandpa spoke calmly, evenly, even as it looked like he was using all his considerable strength to stop Lovino from breaking free.

"Lovi, Lovi, calm down, listen to me, please…"

"We have to help him!" Lovino turned his eyes to Roma, wide and pleading. He clutched, panicking, onto Roma's shirt. "Please, Grandpa, please help him, please…"

"Lovino, I'm sorry, there is nothing we can do, not today..." Roma tried to place a hand soothingly to his cheek, but Lovino let out a strangled cry and pushed it away.

"No, NO! You don't understand, they're torturing him right now, they're… oh my God…" Lovino took great gulps of air, turning white. He looked like he was about to faint. "Oh my God, no…" Then he pounded frantically, manically, screaming, at Roma's chest. "LET ME GO!" Lovino almost managed to slip through Roma's grasp, but Roma managed to hold his arms and slammed him against the wall at the last second.

"What's wrong?"

Lovino and Roma both looked over at the quiet, trembling question, noticing Feliciano for the first time. Lovino's expression turned from terrified to furious in an instant. "You. It's YOUR FAULT!"

Feliciano gasped and took a step backwards. Clenching panic gripped his heart. "What? What's…"

"Your filthy German *boyfriend!"* Lovino spat the word. "He turned him in, he must have, how else could they know so suddenly?"

Feliciano's heart froze in his chest. The room turned dark and cold. "Is… is Antonio…"

"It seems the Gestapo received a tipoff last night," said Roma flatly. "They captured Antonio early this morning." Feliciano swallowed a wave of nausea. Lovino again fought to free himself from Roma's grip.

"What else did you tell this German, Feliciano?" he shouted angrily. "What did you tell him about Antonio?"

"No!" cried Feliciano, shocked and distressed. "I never mentioned anything about Antonio, never, and it couldn't have been Ludwig anyway, not last night, that's impossible!"

Roma just closed his eyes and turned his head, but Lovino shouted, "Why?"

"Because… because…" Feliciano's eyes darted between his grandpa and his brother. But there was no reason to hide the truth anymore. By now, they knew anyway. "Because Ludwig was with me all night." A massive roar flooded the room as more planes flew overhead. The Americans were attacking; the Germans were prepared. An aerial battle was well underway.

Lovino shook his head, distraught and bewildered. He looked hopelessly from Feliciano to Roma to the door. And then he visibly shattered. His legs collapsed beneath him and Roma gently lowered him to the ground. "I never should have left," Lovino gasped through his wracking sobs. "I never should have made that stupid promise. I never should have… oh God… Antonio…" Lovino shook helplessly, his face white and horrified, his eyes wild and disbelieving. Feliciano never believed he could see his brother like this and he felt like his own heart had been torn out, like his world was ending as well.

"You did the only thing you could do," said Roma softly. "You listened to him when he told you to go. You did the right thing."

"No. No." Lovino finally looked exhausted, drained, and he clung to Roma, who stroked his hair and murmured softly.

"We will do all we can for him, Lovino. Everything we can."

Feliciano stood watching, tears on his cheeks, completely at a loss. He did not know what to say, what to do, what to feel. Antonio had been captured, Lovino destroyed. Grandpa Roma was helpless to do anything. And Feliciano couldn't help but think, as the noise of the battle grew louder, that Ludwig was up there. That Feliciano could not know if he would ever see him again. Everything Feliciano knew, everything he had come to rely on, was suddenly falling apart around him. Feliciano felt lost, frightened, confused. "What does this all mean, Grandpa? What's going to happen now?" The noise from outside overwhelmed the silence of the room: the blasting explosions nearby, the roar of engines overhead, the thunderous and terrifying and sky-shattering clamour of a distant battle that was far too close.

Grandpa Roma shook his head as he rocked Lovino gently. "I don't know."

Some months later…

"Ground Control to Schwarz Leader. Come in Schwarz Leader. Can you give us your position?"

The voice crackled through Ludwig's speakers and into his ears, very nearly startling him from the relative silence and calm of the flight thus far. He quickly shook out of his serene state, surprised and angry that he had so easily allowed himself to blank out. He scanned the clear skies in his line of vision as he prepared to respond. He hadn't thought he would need to do so anytime soon. They were nearly back at base, returning from a long mission escorting bombers to their new base on the Austrian border. Ludwig was tired, drained, and running low on both fuel and energy. He could only guess his three accompanying squadron members

were feeling the same. Ludwig fitted his mask in place to respond. "This is Schwarz Leader to Ground Control. We are currently on vector one-seven-three heading two-four-five, all seems well. Over."

"Thank you Schwarz Leader. We have received reports of enemy fighters patrolling your area. Be on the lookout. Over."

Ludwig carefully searched the sky again, his eyes drifting from the vast expanse of blue above right down to the wide open green fields of the countryside below him. His chest panged at the sight as it always did, memories assaulting him of green grass and oak trees and beautiful, perfect afternoons. Raising his eyes, his gaze rested on the small, tattered red flower he had attached to the front of his cockpit.

Thoughts of Feliciano were constant these days. Thoughts, memories - they were all Ludwig had to get him through. He had not seen Feliciano since the beautiful, stormy, almost dreamlike night they had parted. Gazing down at Feliciano as he slept, dressing quietly and sliding the precious photograph into his wallet, placing one last kiss to Feliciano's soft, warm skin and hearing him sigh in his sleep… leaving Feliciano that night was the hardest thing Ludwig had ever done. And then everything went to hell. The Americans landed and forced Ludwig's unit into retreat. Months of desperate air battles, of constant retreat; of losing aircraft and losing men, always losing men. Twenty-two years old and Ludwig was one of the veterans of the Italian campaign. His country and his duty had always been everything to Ludwig. And yet now, after seeing more of war and feeling more of peace than he had ever dreamt he could bear, it was strange how often those simple, naive, honest words of Feliciano's echoed through Ludwig's head. *"Switzerland, Ludwig. I'd leave right now if you asked me. This second."*

Ludwig tried to snap his thoughts back into order and spoke into his mask. "We have no sightings currently, Ground Control. If anything changes we will let you know. To repeat, our current heading is two –"

The flare came from nowhere. A blazing red trail shot past the right side of the aircraft and Ludwig unthinkingly pulled into a quick ascent. His eyes shot to his mirrors and this time he saw it. Unmistakable. A plane swooping down behind him, a Mustang, closing in fast. Ludwig swore loudly. He smashed the control and changed the audio channel to broadcast to his fellow pilots. "Attention, attention, Mustang closing in, take evas..." And then there were more. The sky behind him was suddenly filled with enemy aircraft, flying out of the sun, appearing from thin air. Ludwig counted four of them before he braced himself, gripped the plane control, and shouted. "Break and engage!"

Ludwig kicked his rudder to hard left and pulled his plane into a tight turn. The first Mustang gained steadily directly behind him. Around him his three pilots executed his order and the squadron split evenly. "Get up," Ludwig shouted. "Pull up into high formation. Execute immediate evasive action, we are under attack."

"Schwarz Two, copy that," came the voice of his wingman. Ludwig barely knew the man. He barely knew any of these pilots, all of them fairly new recruits... too many pilots had been lost lately. This was supposed to be a simple mission. A break for Ludwig and an easy initiation assignment for the rookies. An ambush by Allied aircraft was the last thing they

needed, especially when they were worn out from a previous mission. Their voices sounded alarmed as they spoke over the radio channel, not even using their call signs.

"Where the hell did they come from?"

"Is it the Brits?"

"No, it's the Americans."

"God damn it, I'm too tired for this shit."

Another flare flew between the aircraft and Ludwig's stomach jumped, his nerves slightly frayed from the unexpected nature of the attack and the inexperienced pilots he was leading. "Cut the chatter and focus. We need to gain some height." They had to get higher, get above the Mustangs to come down on their tails. They had to gain the advantage they were so sorely lacking. Ludwig continued his steady climb but the Mustang in his rear vision followed easily, maintaining height on him the entire time. And then he disappeared. Ludwig blinked, astonished at how swiftly the plane had dropped from his field of vision. "Where the hell did he..."

Suddenly the Mustang appeared before him, dropped in from nowhere. In only seconds, Ludwig realised who it was. The words stood out, emblazoned, too obvious, on the side of the P-51 Mustang. *'Lady Beth'*. Ludwig swore and drew his plane into a sudden hard dive. His wingman seemed to have noticed at the same time.

"Holy shit, their leader is the Magician," came his panicked voice over the channel.

"What? That guy is impossible, he's..."

"I said to cut the damn chatter!" shouted Ludwig. He had to keep his men calm even as they were fighting. But he understood their alarm. He knew this American. Had fought with him before, often, ever since the Americans had landed. And he lived up to his name, impossible to get a sight on, always too quick and too evasive. But Ludwig gritted his teeth and smiled grimly. This 'Magician' might be the best the Americans had to throw at them. But Ludwig was damn well the best the Germans had to throw back. "I'm dealing with this one. Deal with the planes on your own backs."

Ludwig pulled out of the dive and performed an easy roll into a jinking climb. Just as he thought, the Mustang was not as easy to pull out of a quick descent and Ludwig finally had a height advantage on the American. He intended to keep it. He performed a quick scan of his visible airspace, thankfully not finding more than the four aircraft that had first ambushed them. He spiral climbed swiftly, trying to get into an advantageous position to attack. His speaker crackled once again.

"This is Ground Control to Schwarz Leader. We lost your audio signal. What is your status, over?"

Ludwig cut into the Mustang's tail, breathed, focused, and fired three bursts straight ahead. The Magician dodged upwards easily. Ludwig swore loudly into the channel. "We have been

engaged by four enemy Mustangs and are moving to defend. They appear to be forming into an echelon formation and... hold, Ground Control, there seems to be..." Ludwig's eyes widened. In the skies before him two new enemy Mustangs flew into sight. Ludwig checked his mirror to see two more coming up from behind. And suddenly they were surrounded. Ludwig's pulse hammered quickly but steadily in his ears. Sweat rose to his palms. Eight enemy aircraft encircled them. Ludwig's throat went dry and he tried to swallow. There were too many. "Ground Control, we are surrounded. We are preparing to evade." He changed the channel, his hand steady. "Schwarz Leader to Schwarz squadron, stay high, prepare for escape, we are..." Damn it, the Americans were everywhere. "Schwarz Three, Mustang on your tail." There was no response, and no move from the pilot to evade. Frustrated anger and panic rose in Ludwig's chest. "Damn it, Schwarz Three, dive! Hard Dive!"

"I'm hit!"

"Bail out," Ludwig shouted frantically. "Schwarz Three, bail out now!" It was too late. The Messerschmitt burst into an inferno, pieces bursting asunder and falling in trails of black and white and fiery smoke. Ludwig stared blankly, his brain screaming at him to do something, to give an order that could salvage this hopeless situation. He had lost a man. He would not lose another. He tried to keep an eye on the enemy Mustangs even as he dealt with their unshakeable leader spiralling impossibly around him. Behind him Ludwig could see the aircraft forming into a multiple echelon formation. A low squadron flew in from the east, a high squadron coming down from the south. His body thrummed with controlled tension. There was nothing else he could do. They could not win this fight. He gave the order, his breathing steady, his head clear.

"This is Schwarz Leader. Immediately execute a swift hard dive descent and split into a level flight, heading vector two-five-seven, head for home. Try to outrun them. This fight is impossible." The two planes dropped away from his sight as they executed his order. A moment later the voice of his wingman cut through the speakers.

"Schwarz Leader, you did not execute the manoeuvre."

Ludwig responded evenly. "Follow my instructions and head vector two-five-seven."

"But Sir..."

"That is a direct order. Over and out."

"Lieutenant!"

Ludwig cut off the channel, forced himself into full concentration, and took a deep gasping breath. He stared at the control, at the floor, at the precious red flower. Then he caught the American leader, their so called Magician, in his sights. He checked his mirror to see his men flying into the distance, having successfully outmanoeuvred the slower Mustangs, and he moved into position to ensure complete and uninterrupted focus on his own plane. Eight American aircraft now surrounded him. But the Magician was Ludwig's only target. "Come on, Magician," he whispered, excitement, anticipation and steady focus thrumming through his head. "Dazzle me."

It did not take long for Ludwig to lose himself once again in the swirling controlled chaos of an aerial dogfight. He let his mind go still and Greta become an extension of himself. Let her take over, let his instincts take control, until it seemed that Greta was turning and spinning and attacking on her own. The first enemy aircraft fell almost before Ludwig realised he was firing. But even as the Mustang fell in a shower of sparks, another replaced it. And that damn Magician was still gaining on Ludwig's tail, and refused to budge. Another plane closed in above him and Ludwig pulled into a roll to throw him off. And once again, the Magician disappeared, to be replaced by yet another Mustang. This group was well organised, controlled, yet unpredictable. And somewhere in the back of Ludwig's mind he had the strangest feeling that they were either playing with him, or unthinkably, giving him some sort of chance. "Damn Americans," Ludwig growled to himself as he tried to keep the flight of Mustangs before him and in his sights.

Ludwig pulled level, caught a Mustang in his sights, and fired directly. The enemy plane flipped backwards and went down in a trail of black smoke. Turning immediately, Ludwig threw another plane from his tail as he scanned the skies for his target. Then the smoke cleared and he had him. Ludwig's heart beat faster as he fought to gain a sight on the American leader. The Magician. The 'Lady Beth'. Ludwig had him fixed. His hand clenched on the control. He braced himself and smiled grimly as he prepared to fire.

And then his sight was cut off when the Magician's wingman dropped suddenly before him, the red maple leaf adorning his Mustang instantly recognisable. The wingman performed an unexpected weave and got a straight shot off on Ludwig's plane. Ludwig pulled into a snap roll to evade but it was too late. The shot tore through his engine and his plane shuddered as it pulled down. Ludwig had to fight with the control to get the aircraft level. "Up, Greta," he growled. "Get up, get up!" He was furious with himself. He should have expected the leader's wingman, should have been waiting for it. But no one ever seemed to notice him until the last moment. Ludwig shook his head to clear it of the shock. He was not going down like this. Not without taking down that Magician first.

But Ludwig could see smoke billowing from the side of his plane. The engine faltered, stuttering as it struggled to maintain power. Ludwig tried to get higher but it was becoming impossible. His plane was flying far too slow. He reached for his mask and turned on the channel. Again, there was only one thing he could do. "Schwarz Leader to Ground Control. I'm hit. My engine is failing. I am going to attempt a landing."

"Schwarz Leader, you are over allied territory."

"I have no choice." Another hit. His plane jerked to the side and Ludwig wrestled the control to level it once again. It was no good. He was going down. "My left wing has been hit. I need to land immediately."

There was a slight pause before Ground Control responded. "Good luck, Schwarz Leader."

Ludwig tore his mask from his face and focused on breathing, on keeping the plane straight, on surviving. In this condition, he would not land safely. But if he didn't get down now the plane would soon roll into a deadly tailspin. He maintained a jagging descent, the low squadron forming a line behind him. He paid them no notice. All his strength, all his focus, was on keeping control of a damaged aircraft which was quickly becoming uncontrollable. A

shower of sparks flew against the side window. White smoke began to fill the cockpit. His speed increased. He gritted his teeth and tried to maintain focus.

But a thousand thoughts and images suddenly ran through his mind. Playing with his grandfather's long white hair as a child. Watching Gilbert wave goodbye as he climbed on a train, neatly dressed in a brand new infantry uniform. And Feliciano: beautiful, strange, wonderful Feliciano. Ludwig's only, his everything. Feliciano running laughing through warm green grass, placing a flower in his jacket, smiling cheerfully for a photograph, gasping beneath him in a hayloft, clutching at his arms and pleading for them to run away together. Ludwig's sight grew dim and blurred from the smoke and he reached across the cockpit for the red flower. *"Here you are, Ludwig, you can have this. In Italian flower is 'fiore'!"*

The ground approached, the wide green field rising up too fast to meet him. Ludwig pulled the plane into landing position, braced himself, and clutched the battered little flower to his chest. At the last second he closed his eyes. "Feliciano..."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

* Yes, Feliciano and Lovino's grandmother is Ancient Greece. Their mother is Renaissance Italy.
* For those who haven't read *'We'll Meet Again,'* The Magician is Alfred. His wingman is, of course, Matthew. :-)

Chapter 12

Blazing light and silent dark drifted interchangeably before Ludwig's eyes. He tried to cling to the light, to blink away the black flashes of oblivion, to stop his mind slipping in and out of consciousness. The smell of smoke hung smothering in the heavy air. It was too hot, too hazy. It would be so easy to let the heavy dark pull him under, and yet a dull, insistent awareness tugged at the corners of his mind. He had to get out. Had to stay awake, had to get out. Drawing upon every reserve of strength he had left, Ludwig forced his eyes open and his mind to stay alert. He gritted his teeth and reached up, pushed open the canopy, and dragged himself out of the cockpit. Falling heavily to the ground, Ludwig stumbled away from the plane, fought for breath and to clear his head of the foggy shock. He finally turned to look behind him and immediately closed his eyes at the painful sight. Greta was burning, flames rising slowly but relentlessly from the engine to engulf the entire plane. Ludwig felt a vicious stab in his chest. But he was alive. He had made it, had landed, and he was amazingly alive, and relatively unscathed. When he turned around to see a group of American airmen striding across the field toward him, he wondered briefly how long that would be the case. Ludwig shook himself out of his daze, stood straight, and waited for the men to reach him.

The man at the front had to be their leader. He carried his headgear beside him, swaggering boldly in his uniform and bomber jacket, his bright blond hair flying messy in the wind. Ludwig knew immediately that this was the Magician. He was younger than Ludwig had expected, but his whole bearing was one of confidence, almost arrogance. He grinned cheerfully as he walked up to stand before Ludwig. Ludwig used his superior height to glare down at him.

"Afternoon." The American pilot looked up at the burning plane and whistled. "That's some fine flying, pilot. Thought for sure you were a goner." Ludwig remained silent, and the pilot turned to speak to the man at his right. "Matt, you speak German right, we need to get this guys name and rank…"

"Lieutenant Ludwig Beilschmidt. Serial number, 2413/9."

The American glanced back at Ludwig, his expression slightly surprised and a little impressed. "Uh, right. You got that, Matt?"

"Got it."

The American nodded and grinned again. "You speak English, German?" Ludwig raised an eyebrow. Was that not obvious? "All right, Lieutenant Beil… Beilsh… Ludwig. I'm gonna have to ask you to surrender your weapons."

Ludwig gave an almost imperceptible nod before he swiftly pulled the pistol from his jacket, spun it so the handle faced the American, and handed it over. He noted with some satisfaction how the other pilots almost flinched away. Ludwig knew he could appear intimidating if he wanted to. Right now, he wanted to. In the end though, he had no power here, and the American knew it. He just smiled as he took the pistol, then looked down at Ludwig's closed

hand and raised an eyebrow. Ludwig followed his gaze. He hadn't even realised he was still holding it; that he had been holding it the entire time. He slowly opened his hand. The little flower was almost crushed. Glaring at the American, Ludwig very deliberately placed the flower in his pocket. They would not be taking it from him. The American looked slightly confused, but then he grinned.

"Your lucky charm, right? Looks like it worked today. This here is mine." The American gestured to a piece of white cloth sticking from his left front pocket. It looked like a handkerchief. "Seems it worked as well. You came close to getting me today, Lieutenant Be… uh… Ludwig. Took down two of my men also. Impressive." Ludwig gave a small shrug. What did the American expect? And why was he chatting away as though they were friends? The American tapped his foot and waited as though expecting Ludwig to respond at some point. He didn't. He wouldn't. Under the Geneva Convention all he was required to tell the enemy was his name, his rank, and his number. He had already done so. He had nothing else to say. "Chatty one, aren't ya," said the American finally. "All right, let's make this easy on everyone. You will come with us quietly, won't you?" As though he had a choice. Ludwig nodded.

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It was with a massive shock that Ludwig realised they had to be close to Feliciano's village. Judging by where he was when shot down, and the duration of the trip to the American base, Ludwig reckoned that they must be only miles outside of it. The same wide fields, the same scented air. Even the view of the mountains was almost identical to how he remembered. It was too cruel, too insane... but of course, the Americans had to be based mainly around Feliciano's village. It was an ideal strategic position to both the mountains and the coast; that's why the Germans had it in the first place, why the Americans had fought so hard for it. Ludwig could not help wondering just how close Feliciano was. Where he was right now, what he was doing, how it would feel to see him, to hold him one more time… Ludwig forced himself to cut off that train of thought. He was only torturing himself.

Ludwig sat warily in a chair against the wall, his arms folded, surveying the air base common room with narrowed eyes. It was not equipped for prisoners, but there were at least twenty American airmen and Ludwig was unarmed, so there was no chance of escape. Ludwig was not used to being helpless. He loathed the feeling. He figured he was waiting for the military police to arrive. And then, who knew. The Americans were said to be good to their prisoners. But Ludwig knew he could expect to see nothing but the inside of a prison camp for the next few years. He burned with anger and shame at the thought. That he had let himself be shot down, that he had shamed his country like this. It was almost unbearable.

The American leader, Jones he had been called, seemed like a decent enough man, despite the strange friendliness and obvious arrogance. To Ludwig's surprise and almost amusement he had even offered him a drink the moment they arrived at the base. He and his wingman – Ludwig could not remember the man's name – looked almost identical, and seemed as oddly friendly as each other, though the wingman was much quieter and less overbearing. He had actually apologised for Greta, then tried to introduce Ludwig to a polar bear attached to his lapel, then pointed out quite clearly that he was Canadian, not American. That was when Ludwig realised he had been the one to shoot him down. He did not respond.

The others, however, were not so friendly. Even now they were throwing him unpleasant glances, muttering to themselves. This, Ludwig could understand. This, he could deal with. He glared back and most looked away when he did. Jones and his Canadian wingman stood talking on the other side of room, but a small group of around six airmen started growing louder as they sat at a nearby table, watching Ludwig, laughing. Ludwig listened warily as their voices rose. Two of the men seemed to be discussing something.

"A picture of a kraut's wife can fetch a good price as a souvenir."

"Go on then, take his wallet, what's he gonna do?"

Ludwig's pulse increased and his skin burned. His shoulders bunched, his chest tightening with uneasy apprehension. Ludwig did not move, but he glared at the man moving towards him as murderously as he could manage. The American faltered slightly, then turned to the other pilot.

"You take it, you're the one who mentioned it first!"

"Come on, he's unarmed. Like I said, what's he gonna do?" The pilot walked straight up to Ludwig and tore open his jacket. It took every ounce of Ludwig's control, every fibre of strength he possessed, to stop himself from grabbing the man by the throat. There were twenty armed Americans in this room. He could do nothing but sit there, forcing himself still, anger burning through his veins as the American pulled Ludwig's wallet from his inner pocket and started rifling through it. He pulled out a few cards, some German and Italian banknotes, then Ludwig's stomach fell and his teeth clenched when the American pulled the precious photograph from the wallet.

"Well, holy shit!" laughed the American. "I ain't got a picture of the kraut's wife, but I think I got something better!"

"What is it?" asked the other man as the group of pilots jostled to look.

"Looks like the krauts are a bunch of faggots after all. Take a look at this shit!" The pilot passed the photograph to the next man who laughed uproariously.

"What the hell?" He turned the photograph over and laughed harder. "The kraut *is* a fag! Take a look at what's written on the back!"

"That's sick, man," said the next pilot as he snatched the photograph, laughing along with the rest. "That's just wrong, and sick."

Ludwig was going to lose control. He could feel it. Feel his blood boil in his veins, his pulse thrum rapid and hazy in his ears, his muscles start to tighten. As the pilots passed the photograph roughly amongst themselves, as they laughed and shot him disgusted looks, Ludwig felt himself engulfed by pure fury. Because he was powerless, and he couldn't stand it. Because the most important thing in his life was nothing but a joke to these Americans. Because more than anything, he needed that photograph of Feliciano. It wasn't much, but it was all he had left. It was everything. And if these bastards took it from him… if they ruined it… Ludwig's control was starting to slip…

"What the hell is going on over here?" The angry voice cut through the red haze surrounding his head and Ludwig glanced over to see Jones marching over to the group of pilots, his expression furious. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The group of men broke apart but the man holding the photograph stood his ground. "Come on, Jones, we shot him down fair and square, it's all right to take a look at his wallet, surely."

Jones snatched the wallet and the photograph from the pilot. "Actually, it's not, and it's certainly not all right to stand around laughing at a picture of his…" Jones trailed off as he looked at the photograph. His eyebrows furrowed, his mouth opening slightly in surprise. But he did not look disgusted like the other pilots. Instead, his expression remained unfathomable, slightly puzzled and somehow almost sad. Finally Jones looked back up at the pilot, anger in his eyes again. "Get out of here, Sergeant. And it's Lieutenant to you, not Jones."

The sergeant was obviously not used to being spoken to like that. He took a step back and nodded, his hands in his pockets. "Well, yes Lieutenant, *sir*." Then he sauntered away.

Ludwig's rage turned quickly to confusion. This American flight leader was something else. His men obviously respected him, but spoke to him as though he was one of them. He had treated Ludwig with nothing but courtesy since the moment he had shot him down. And now he was gazing at him curiously, something strangely akin to understanding in his eyes. Ludwig had no idea how to take it all. Jones nodded to him, smiled, and mouthed an apology. Then he placed the photograph in his pocket and despair and anger flared again in Ludwig's chest. But he could do nothing as Jones walked slowly back over to his wingman, their eyes flicking almost imperceptibly back to Ludwig occasionally as they spoke. And Ludwig was helpless to understand, to get back his precious photograph, to do anything but sit and endure the stares of the room until the special forces finally arrived. Ludwig was relieved when they did.

Being led through the corridor to the waiting car outside, Ludwig realised that he was not getting it back: he had lost his photograph. Lost the only image he had of his beautiful Feliciano, laughing brightly at the camera with that ever-present cheerful smile, his eyes so bright and his cheeks slightly red and his hair flying up in that one curl of his that never sat straight. The picture with his goodbye written on the back, with his memories of their last night in that barn. Ludwig let the officer lead him by handcuffs to the door without protest. He felt like he had lost everything.

"Hey, Lieutenant." Ludwig turned at the voice, not sure if it was directed at him. Jones hurried down the corridor, but his eyes were fixed on the officer detaining Ludwig. "You've left some sort of… a, uh… you've left something back in the common room."

The officer looked skeptical. "Left something?"

"Yeah, some folder, it has 'top secret' stamped on it or something like that…"

The officer released Ludwig and hurried back towards the room, his face panicked. "Watch the prisoner, flyboy!" he shouted at the last second.

"Of course, not a problem, I under…" The officer disappeared around the corner and Jones turned immediately to Ludwig. Ludwig looked at him in complete confusion. It was becoming quite obvious. All Americans were insane. "Lieutenant B… Ludwig. Damn, your German names are impossible. I believe this is yours." Ludwig's chest swelled with hope. He almost gasped as Jones took the photograph from his pocket and quickly placed it in Ludwig's. He was confused, stunned, but more than anything just incredibly grateful. He gave the American a confounded stare, but Jones just smiled at him. "Good luck, pilot." Ludwig nodded slowly. Then a special forces officer appeared at the door just as the earlier lieutenant returned from the common room.

"What's going on in here, what's the damn holdup?"

"You're crazy, flyboy, there's no folder in there, what are you playing at?"

Jones raised his hands and backed away down the corridor. "Nothing, sorry, my mistake! Continue, my good sirs." Then he gave Ludwig a tiny wink and turned the corner.

"Damned pilots are all crazy," said the lieutenant as he again took a hold of the handcuffs. Ludwig had to agree. But it looked like some of them were decent men, as well.

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Feliciano walked softly, quietly, into the front room. Everything was soft and quiet around here these days. Lovino sat at the table, staring at the wall. He did that a lot these days, too. Feliciano walked up behind him and threw his arms around his neck. "Good morning Lovino! How are you today, Lovino? Have I told you how much I love you, Lovino?"

"Good God, are you ever going to stop doing this, Feliciano?" Lovino sounded cranky, but Feliciano could tell he was smiling, even if only a little.

"Stop what? Can't I hug my big brother and tell him I love him!"

"Yes, yes, that's quite enough." Lovino patted Feliciano's arm and Feliciano released him gently.

"There is a tomato flan on the bench, it had better be all eaten up when I get home tonight!"

"You're going out?"

Feliciano took a few apples from the bowl on the table and placed them in his basket for lunch. "Only for a little while. I'll meet you this afternoon at the cantina, if you come. You should come, Lovino. You know, you can't live in the house forever."

Lovino turned and fixed Feliciano with a worried glare. "You're going to your tree again." Feliciano just nodded. "Feli..." Feliciano shook his head, silently refusing to listen. He knew his brother understood, but Lovino still said, with the faintest hint of a smile, "You know, you can't live at that tree forever."

Feliciano smiled back. How easily, how terribly, Lovino understood. "That flan, Lovino. Every last bit."

When things happened, they happened so quickly. The Germans were finally out of the village, though the damage from their final battles with the Americans was still being cleaned up. Since the Americans had taken over the nearby bases, life had changed. Mostly for the better... but this was still a war. Feliciano had not seen Ludwig in months, not since their last night together in the barn. And Lovino... Feliciano forced his mind to stop turning. He did not want to think about that.

Feliciano ambled slowly down the country road, swinging his basket beside him, the same as he did every day. He spent most of his free time at the oak tree now. Just sitting, humming to himself, reminiscing, waiting… always waiting. The breeze drifted gently by, carrying the familiar scents of spring, but this year they seemed different - bitter, almost. Feliciano was still clinging to winter. As usual, Feliciano barely paid attention to the world around him, too wrapped up in the thoughts which took up his every waking moment. He wondered where Ludwig was. What he was doing. If he was free. If he was safe. Oh God, if he was alive. It was too much to bear that Ludwig might disappear forever, and Feliciano would never know what had happened to the most important person in the world.

With a sudden jolt, Feliciano came back to himself just in time to notice that he was about to run into two men dressed in military uniforms. His stomach dropped, instinct took over and he pulled out his little white flag and began waving it frantically. "I surrender! *Mi arrendo! Je me rends! Kamerad!"*

The two men stopped short, simply stared at him for a moment, then the shorter one turned to the other. "I think he surrenders."

"I got the first bit. I think the rest was in Chinese or something…"

Feliciano paused, calmed down somewhat, and glanced between the two men staring at him amusedly. "You're… Americans?"

"He is," said the shorter one. His voice was very quiet. "I'm Canadian."

"Ohh…" Feliciano pointed to the man's lapel. "The polar bear."

The Canadian seemed delighted he had noticed. "Why yes! This here is Kumadara."

"Damn it, man, why can you never remember the name of your own stupid mascot?" asked the American, his eyebrows drawn together in frustration. "It's Kumajiro!"

"Is it? Oh. Well, either way, he's a lucky little bastard." The Canadian gave Feliciano a friendly smile. "I apologise if we startled you."

"Oh, that's all right, I wasn't paying attention. I just noticed the uniforms, and some men in uniforms are really mean and try and hit you, but then of course some are really nice and handsome and wonderful." The men's uniforms were slightly different to the ones Feliciano was used to seeing on the American soldiers in town. The Canadian wore a blazer and the American wore a big brown jacket with a big, fluffy collar. They were both blond, but the Canadian's hair was longer, and strangely enough they looked almost identical. "Are you two brothers? You look like brothers. Everyone says that Lovino and I look like brothers, which

makes sense, because we are. Only isn't it strange that you're both from different countries? Did you grow up in Canada or America?"

The Canadian had that slightly dazed look that Feliciano was used to seeing, but the American just smiled and answered easily. "We're not brothers, everyone says that though, people always get us mixed up, it's really quite funny. I grew up on a farm in the states and Matt was raised by bears."

Matt looked taken aback. "I… what?"

Feliciano gasped. "Wow! You grew up on a farm too?"

The American grinned widely. "Born and bred Nebraskan!"

"Gosh! That's amazing! I mean, except that, um… well, I don't actually know what that is." Feliciano scratched his head briefly then reached into his basket. "Would you like an apple?" Feliciano held out the apple and the American took it cheerfully.

"Sure!"

The Canadian just shook his head in bewilderment. "Alfred, I believe we may have found the only other person in the world who speaks your dialect."

Alfred's eyes widened in sudden realisation. "Hey, wait, yeah, you ain't speaking Italian!"

"No," replied Feliciano. "Didn't you notice?"

"That's not what I…"

"See, Matt, here you are going on about how I need to learn all these foreign languages, and everyone over here speaks English."

"I speak a little bit of German, too," said Feliciano proudly. "Here you are, Canadian Matt, have an *apfel*."

Matt smiled dazedly as he took the apple. "*Danke."*

"*Bitte schön*." Feliciano felt a slight stab in his chest at the words. How many times had he said that to Ludwig?

"I'm sorry, we haven't introduced ourselves properly," said Matt.

"No, you haven't."

Alfred leant towards Feliciano and muttered, "He's so rude sometimes." Feliciano laughed and pulled out an apple for himself. He liked this American. He was funny, and nice. Matt just gave him a frustrated look.

"Well go on then, you do the honours, you do it so well and inoffensively."

Alfred gave a small bow. "Thank you, I shall. Italian friend, this is Lieutenant Matthew Williams, wingman extraordinaire, and I am Lieutenant Alfred F Jones, here to save Italy!"

"Gosh," said Feliciano around a bite of the apple. "All by yourself?"

"Well, Matt's gonna help. A bit."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Don't listen to him, he's slightly delusional."

Feliciano laughed again. It felt like months since he had last laughed so easily. "I'm Feliciano! I'm trying to save Italy as well, at least that's what Grandpa says. We're part of the Resistenza and I think I'm allowed to tell you that because apparently you're on our side, whatever that means." Feliciano welcomed any distraction lately, so he was enjoying talking to these friendly strangers. Anything to take his mind to something else, even if only for a little while. Maybe he could even make this distraction last a little longer… "Oh, I know, since you're our allies and we're friends now you should come and have a drink with us this afternoon, and I can introduce you to my grandpa and my brother and all of the other resistance members, I'm sure they would all be so happy to meet you!"

Alfred looked genuinely delighted. "That'd be swell! You Italians have bourbon, right?"

"Yes, of course! I mean, I think so. Well, um… actually, I don't know what that is either. Anyway, we'll be at the Cantina Verde in town, ask anyone where it is." Feliciano could barely believe he was saying the words. Things were so different now from when the Germans were in town.

Alfred laughed joyfully. "Great, I haven't had a proper drink in weeks!"

The American's laugh was infectious. It was so loud, so boisterous. "Wait until I tell everyone we're drinking with two American..." Feliciano smiled apologetically at Matthew, "Sorry, American and Canadian soldiers!"

Matthew laughed softly. "Well actually, we're both fighter pilots."

Feliciano's smile fell immediately, his skin turning instantly cold. The light, carefree feeling in his chest vanished and instead an icy, angry shudder ran down his spine. He squared his shoulders and gritted his teeth. "Oh." He clenched his fist around the apple and took a quick, unsteady step backwards. "Pilots."

Alfred and Matthew glanced at each other briefly, confusion on their faces. "Yes," said Matthew simply, inquiringly, the word almost a question.

"Oh," said Feliciano again. He took another step away, his skin prickling unpleasantly. "Um. I have to... go."

The pilots still looked slightly puzzled, but they smiled carefully and Alfred said cheerfully, "See you later this afternoon then!"

Feliciano nodded tersely and ran swiftly past. His hand shook as he threw the apple into the grass beside the road. Hot, unfamiliar rage rolled in his chest, in his gut, and he blinked

angrily, refusing to cry. He had wanted to forget everything. He had wanted a moment of peace, of forgetful happiness. Instead, he had just invited the very people trying to kill Ludwig to the cantina.

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The Italians who understood English were hanging on the American's every word. Those who didn't just stared, obviously unsure what to make of this loud American who was already halfway through a bottle of bourbon and gesturing wildly as he recounted his recent exploits to the room.

"So there I am, isolated, completely out of sight of my squad, surrounded by six German Messerschmitts!"

The Canadian knocked back a glass of bourbon before interjecting. "Four."

"I'm pretty sure it was six."

"It was four."

"All right, five then. So anyway there I am, wondering how the hell I'm gonna get out of this one, when suddenly, Matt comes flying out of the sun and does this ridiculously sudden dive in the middle of the lot of them. I tell you what, it confused me just as much as it confused the hell out of the krauts, but it gave me just enough time to take down two of them, dive, turn, and get the hell away from there. They call me the Magician, but I tell ya, Matt here is the invisible man!"

Feliciano smiled politely as the rest of the room laughed appreciatively. The cantina was packed full of Resistenza members and local villagers, talking loudly, offering Alfred and Matthew more drinks, hanging on every word they said about the aerial battle with the Germans. Feliciano could not remember ever seeing the cantina this full, or hearing it this noisy. People conversed loudly as they drank, broke into small arguments, occasionally sang along with the radio that blasted from the corner, jostled over each other to speak to the American pilots. Feliciano was not sure how to take this. On the one hand Alfred and Matthew were really nice, funny, and they seemed genuinely happy to speak to everyone. But Feliciano didn't like listening to them talk about shooting down Messerschmitts, or calling the Germans 'krauts', or speaking of pushing the Germans out of the country. Lovino was of course pointedly ignoring the pilots, while Grandpa Roma was all hospitable and politeness, but he seemed to be trying to find out information from them at the same time. Feliciano wondered briefly what Antonio would ask the pilots if he were here.

"One thing I'll say for the krauts," said Alfred in response to a question from Roma. "They don't turn and run. They fight to the end."

"Like our man yesterday," said Matthew, almost inaudibly.

"Oh, yes!" said Alfred, his face lighting up excitedly. The group clustered around the table fell silent as he spoke. "You should've seen this guy! I've been after him for weeks, and yesterday morning I thought I had him. We did have him... his squad escaped and this one

stayed to distract us. So of course we thought he'd be easy." Alfred shook his head and laughed wryly.

"And he wasn't?" asked Feliciano quietly. It annoyed him how Alfred seemed to think he was better than every German pilot. Feliciano knew he could not be better than Ludwig, at least. Alfred looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before responding.

"They call me the Magician. Because I'm evasive... they see me, I disappear, I drop in again and before they know it, bam. All over. But this guy was something different. He comes at us straight - no hiding, no tricks. Just charges us head on, one pilot taking on a whole squadron. I've never seen anything like it. He was after me, that was obvious. Took down two of our men doing it, and he would've had me, too, if it weren't for Matt here. But even with his engine on fire and a torn wing, this German was still shooting. And I tell you what, it took the whole damn lot of us to bring him down. But here's the kicker." Alfred paused to drink then leant forward eagerly, everyone hanging on his every word. "The German lands the damn plane! Takes it down like he's on a test flight! After he's grounded, he steps out of that wreck like he's getting off the bus. Gives us his rank, name and number, not a word more." Alfred raised his hands slightly and sat back slowly. "Say what you will about the Germans. But their pilots are brave bastards."

The room filled with chatter again when Alfred fell silent. He furrowed his forehead as he looked down, lost in thought, then almost startled Feliciano by staring him suddenly in the eyes. His eyebrows shot up and he whistled softly. "Well I'll be damned."

"What?" asked Feliciano, puzzled by the sudden strange behaviour.

Alfred immediately dropped his gaze back to his drink. "Sorry. Nothing."

More stories, more drinks. Everyone wanted to speak to Alfred, and he gave his full attention to everyone who did. Everyone liked him immediately; it seemed impossible not to. Feliciano was so confused by his conflicting emotions. He liked Alfred, too. He'd tried not to, but the American had been nothing but friendly and cheerful since he had walked into the cantina. He insisted on sitting beside Feliciano, chatting about the difference in seasons between Italy and America, about the great cities of London and New York, about the cats he had passed in the alley earlier. He'd asked Feliciano about life on his farm and what it was like in the resistance and what he thought of baseball and cricket. Alfred even gave him an orange in payment for the apple earlier. And before Feliciano knew it they were chatting away like old friends. But then Alfred started talking about battle. And the men he described shooting down – they were Ludwig's people. Alfred was Ludwig's enemy. Feliciano had no idea how to feel. Part of him wanted to remain angry, but he never was able to stay angry for long, and it was so silly to feel that way about someone who was just doing what he thought was right, the same as Ludwig. It was too much to try and comprehend. Feliciano was at least relieved that Lovino had finally left the house to join them, though was starting to wonder if maybe that wasn't the best idea after all.

"Where did you even find these bastards?" muttered Lovino, taking a large gulp of wine. He had refused to speak to the pilots all afternoon. He had barely even looked at them. Feliciano shrugged guiltily and whispered back while Alfred was engaged in conversation with Roma.

"On the road outside town."

Lovino glared at him sideways. "What is it with you picking up fighter pilots, Feli?"

"I wasn't trying to, they were just really nice and they made me laugh and stop thinking about horrible things so I asked if they'd like to have a drink with us because I thought maybe everyone else would like to meet them too. I didn't even know they were pilots." Feliciano didn't add that he would not have asked them if he had known. He tried to push Lovino off the topic. "It's good to see you out of the house, though!"

"Yes, well. I'm not here to talk to your little pilot friends. I just needed a damn drink." Lovino swiftly finished his glass of wine. Not long later, he'd had far too many and, as usual, they were getting the better of him.

"You know what I think?" Lovino shouted in Italian, leaning on a chair and pointing his drink at Alfred. "I think you're just a presumptuous bastard! Think you can come in here, and blow up a few German planes, and that we're all gonna whatsit... fall over!" Lovino stumbled, spilt his drink, then quickly pulled himself up again. "No, I mean, over you, fall all over you!" Feliciano and Roma glanced at each other briefly. It was pointless to try and stop Lovino once he got started lately. Luckily the rest of the room was still so loud that Lovino was not making quite as big of a scene as he possibly could have. Alfred, however, looked completely bewildered as to why he was being shouted at in Italian and having a wine glass waved before his face.

"Uh, sorry, I don't know what you're say..."

"Shut up! You know what we've gone through? Still, still going through? You're a bit late now, aren't you?" Lovino gestured wildly and Roma smoothly took the drink from his hand. Lovino barely seemed to notice. "Could've come and kicked the Germans out months ago, couldn't you? Could have been a week earlier, a day, a few fucking hours, but oh no, had to wait until it was too late, too damn late now! Tell your little stories and think we're all gonna call you heroes well you can fuck off is what you can do!"

Alfred just smiled and nodded before leaning over to Feliciano and whispering, "He seems real pissed off about something."

Feliciano smiled apologetically. "Yeah, he kind of always seems pissed off about something. He usually is. But be nice to him. He's... well, he's got a reason to be pissed off this time."

"Does he know we don't speak Italian?"

"Yes." Feliciano raised his voice so Lovino could hear. "And he does understand English, he just pretends not to."

Lovino turned and yelled at Feliciano, still in Italian. "Shut the hell up, really Feliciano, you should never have brought these stupid Americans here in the first place…"

"I'm Canadian," said Matthew softly. Lovino broke off and stared at him blankly. He was obviously a little shocked to realise that Matthew had understood every word he had said.

"Oh." Lovino stumbled a little again and his shoulders fell.

"I'm very sorry for everything you've gone through, even though I am sure I can't begin to understand." Matthew spoke smoothly in perfect Italian. "And I apologise for Alfred here. I know he can be a bit loud and arrogant, but he means well. Please believe me, if we'd had the chance to land any earlier, Alfred would have been the first to jump at the opportunity. I hope you can forgive us for any unintended offense. We really are so honoured to be in your lovely village and we are very grateful for everyone's hospitality."

The entire room stared in silence. It seemed to be the first time most had even noticed the Canadian.

"Is there any language you don't speak, Matt?" asked Alfred finally.

Matthew raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Chinese, Alfred. I don't speak Chinese."

Lovino narrowed his eyes, blushed red, and quickly blinked his embarrassed expression away. "Well. Um. All right. I have to go home now. I can't leave…" he trailed off and glared at the pilots again, then stared, almost disoriented, around the gradually loudening room. "I have to go."

Roma nodded, smiling the way he always did, like everything was all right and nothing was out of the ordinary. "Of course. Are you all right to walk on your own?"

"I'm not a child," Lovino spat back before turning and storming from the cantina, kicking a chair on his way.

"Well, gosh," said Alfred, watching Lovino leave with a slightly stunned expression. "Is he gonna be all right?"

"He's going to be just fine," said Roma, smiling reassuringly at Feliciano. Feliciano tried to smile back, but just looked away. He only hoped Grandpa Roma was right. Roma leant across the table and poured Alfred another bourbon. "It is good my little Feliciano made your acquaintance today. I am glad to be able to talk with our allies firsthand. And of course, I am pleased to see the war in the air seems to be favouring you."

"We're doing all right. It's never ending, though." Alfred's brave exterior seemed to fade a little, and he glanced around cautiously before continuing. "And I don't really know how much it's all counting in the end."

Roma's eyes flashed with interest. "Meaning?"

"Well, we go up, we get shot down, we send up more. The Germans do the same. We pushed them back towards the border but since then its been a stalemate… and I just don't see how its worth it, you know. I'm losing too many men. They're telling us we're supposed to be heading to France soon, but I don't see that happening. Its just this, day after day, and we ain't getting nowhere. Seems like just a damn waste."

Roma nodded understandingly. "But that is war, isn't it. Now I was wondering if you could tell me..." Roma broke off abruptly and smiled again at Feliciano. "Surely this must be boring you, Feli?"

Feliciano let Grandpa Roma have his way. He did not want to hear anymore, anyway. He stood and left Roma to talk privately to Alfred and Matthew. He wandered between the tables, speaking briefly to a few people, but mainly kept his distance. He felt like he was walking in a dream. This whole afternoon was just too unreal, too painful, too much. He couldn't stop the awful thoughts and fears that attacked him relentlessly. Could Ludwig be one of those who Alfred spoke of shooting down? Feliciano tried to convince himself - Ludwig was better than that. He had said so himself. But that didn't stop the horrible sick twisting in Feliciano's stomach, the terrifying images of burning planes in his head. And the whole time, Alfred kept looking over at him strangely...

Feliciano was just starting to wonder if he should follow Lovino home when Alfred left Roma and Matthew talking and headed straight towards him. He took Feliciano's elbow and led him to a corner. But before Feliciano could ask what was going on Alfred said quickly, quietly, "Look, this might sound real strange and all, but… do you know a German pilot named Lieutenant… Ludwig?"

Feliciano blinked a few times in complete and utter shock. Now he was certain he was dreaming. He could scarcely speak. "What… how…" How could this American possibly know that? Unless he'd seen him alive, or... unless... Feliciano suddenly felt like he had been stabbed in the chest. He couldn't breathe, then his breath caught painfully in his throat, then it came so fast he started to hyperventilate. Everything turned red and hazy and he took an unsteady step backwards, shaking his head frantically. "No..."

"No, stop, it's all right, he's alive." Feliciano nearly fell over in relief. Air flooded his lungs and he looked up hopefully. "But…" Alfred paused, looked around, and lowered his voice. "He has been taken prisoner."

His lungs choked closed once again. Feliciano could hardly believe he was having this conversation, could hardly believe this man before him could know the answers to the questions that had assaulted him for months. Ludwig... taken prisoner... "Where? Please, tell me where?"

Alfred shook his head, and a pained expression crossed his face. "I'm sorry, you know I can't tell you that."

Feliciano briefly closed his eyes and nodded. What a silly thing to ask. He did not even know what he could do if he was told. "Of course. He's the one you were talking about earlier, isn't he? You… you shot him down."

"Yes." Alfred swiftly led Feliciano to a nearby empty table, then sat down slowly beside him. The noise of the cantina was enough to drown out their conversation. "How do you even know him? How does he have a photograph of you?"

Feliciano barely heard the words. All he could hear was a rushing in his ears, all he could think was... "Is he all right? Is he hurt? What will you…"

"He's fine. Completely uninjured. Our military police took him away today. He will be questioned, but force will not be employed. He is an honourable officer, and he will be treated accordingly."

Feliciano breathed easier in relief. "And... and then?"

Alfred's expression was almost apologetic as he answered. "Then he will be transferred to a prisoner of war camp."

Feliciano squeezed his eyes shut against the tears that pricked his eyes, swallowed past the heavy, painful lump in his throat. He leant forward on the table and put his head in his hands. What did that mean? When would he see Ludwig again? Oh God, oh please no, would he ever see him again...

"You… you're… you and he…"

Feliciano jumped slightly as he looked up. He had almost forgotten Alfred was there, watching him curiously, worriedly. Of course, he must be so confused by all this. "I met him in winter," said Feliciano. "He was stationed near the village, probably near where you are now. He used to walk out to the countryside to see me. We would meet by the oak tree in the field near my house. I suppose, in the end, we didn't actually see each other all that much… it was only a few times after all. But it's funny, it almost seems like I can't really remember anything clearly up until then. But those few times we met… I remember every second." Feliciano smiled at the memories of the best days of his life. "He is the best, kindest, most wonderful man I have ever met."

"You love him." Alfred said it so certainly.

"More than I ever thought I could love anyone, or anything, ever." Feliciano immediately laughed nervously at himself. He had spoken the words before he thought about them. Just what was he saying? This wasn't something people understood; most people thought it was wrong to love another man, though Feliciano could not see why. But who knew how this American would take it… "I'm sorry. What a silly thing to say."

Alfred seemed to understand Feliciano's sudden panic and he responded quickly. "No. It's not silly."

At the kind look in his eyes, Feliciano felt it was all right to continue. "We took the photographs one day when we went walking in the hills. I have his here." Feliciano pulled the photograph he carried always from his pocket and handed it to Alfred, who nodded as he took it.

"That's him." Alfred turned it over and read the back. *"'Auf wiedersehen*, *sweetheart'*. His said *'bella ciao.'"*

Feliciano nodded. He did not want to explain.

"Feliciano…" Alfred furrowed his brows as he looked at the photograph, his expression confused and bewildered. "You are part of the resistance. He is your enemy."

Feliciano shrugged, smiled slightly, and looked Alfred in the eyes. "There are no sides when it comes to love." Alfred sighed softly, smiled gently, and passed back the photograph. Feliciano placed it carefully back in his chest pocket, then cleared his throat and pushed back his chair. "I am sure Grandpa will help you with anything you need to know about the Germans. You're busy fighting them after all, I'm sure you will want information. I wish I could tell you more, but I don't know all that much, really, and no one tells me much anymore after... well, like I said, I don't know much these days." Feliciano stood and turned to leave.

"How old are you, Feliciano?"

Feliciano paused and looked back down at Alfred, a little thrown by the sudden question. "What? Oh, I... I'm nearly twenty."

"No kidding. Same as me!" Alfred grinned cheerfully, though he looked slightly surprised. "Funny… I thought you were younger."

Feliciano felt a strange mixture of upset and offended, and yet somehow he understood. After all, wasn't that what everyone always thought? Suddenly desperate to be alone, Feliciano hurried past the tables and clusters of cheerful, chatting villagers, headed straight into the next room, and slammed the door shut behind him. The immediate silence was reassuring, comforting. He fell into a chair, covered his face with hands, and let his grief engulf him. What did the Americans do with their prisoners? Of course everyone said they were good, they didn't use torture or anything like that… but how could he be certain? What if they weren't like everybody said? What if they hurt him, what if they executed him, oh God what if it was worse, what if it was like what happened to Antonio? Feliciano was suddenly furious having these Americans in the next room, angry at anything, at anyone who kept Ludwig away from him. He missed Ludwig so much it was a physical pain, and he couldn't stand it. He wanted him back more than he had ever wanted anything. He would give anything, do anything, just to see him even one more time. But it was impossible.

The door clicked open and Feliciano looked up to see Grandpa Roma closing it behind him. He looked tired tonight. But then, he always looked tired these days. He slowly crossed the room and sat beside Feliciano. "Feli… is everything all right?"

Feliciano tried to nod, but shook his head instead. He never could lie to his Grandpa. "No." But he didn't cry. He couldn't cry. It was like there were no tears left. This was just a numbing sort of ache, a grief so exhausted it could not feel hot or sharp or vicious. It just felt completely empty, utterly hopeless.

Roma sat quiet, still. Feliciano could hear nothing but his breathing. "Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked finally.

"No." But after only a second, Feliciano leant against him and Roma took him in his arms, holding him close, rocking him gently. Since the morning after those awful words that still burned in Feliciano's memory, the morning of Lovino's devastated breakdown, Grandpa Roma had been the one strong, secure, dependable thing in their lives. The rock they threw themselves against. He laughed and sang while they were empty and silent; stood quiet and accepting when they sobbed and screamed. He held together when they fell apart. Even now

he said the same words he always used to, held him and tried to make it better, even though Feliciano was no longer a child and they both knew that now that was impossible.

"It's all right, Feli. Everything's all right now."

For the first time Feliciano wondered if things could be different if he was a soldier, or a fighter; if he was someone important. Someone who could do something, could save Ludwig, could make it so there was some way to see him again. But he was just small and unimportant and he had no power to do anything. He was just what everyone always thought he was - silly little Feliciano. Ludwig was the only one who ever took him seriously. Who listened and cared about what he had to say, who thought he could be brave if he needed to be...

"Grandpa, do you wish I was… like Alfred? He's so brave and, and everyone likes him, and… and he's the same age as me, you know. The same age as me and he's fighting and flying planes and… and you'd be proud of me if I was like him, wouldn't you."

Roma responded immediately. "No." Feliciano was surprised by his answer.

"Huh?"

"I wouldn't be proud of you if you were like him. Because that's not who you are."

"But…"

"Don't let anyone tell you you're not brave. Yes, you have done things which have upset me... devastated me." Feliciano flinched. Roma had never said another word after that awful afternoon... but Feliciano knew how much his betrayal still affected him. He was just grateful that his Grandpa's love was stronger than that. "But you trust your heart, Feliciano. And that is such a brave thing. Not everyone can do that."

Feliciano shut his eyes tightly. He did not know where to go from here. If he could hope for Ludwig; if he should give up. "Grandpa… why does everything always end up hurting so much?"

It was a pointless question, and of course Grandpa Roma had no answer. He simply stroked Feliciano's hair and said, "I wish you could be innocent forever, Feli."

But of course, some things were impossible. When his Grandpa had left, when he had pulled himself together, when he felt he could face the world again, Feliciano finally brought himself to walk back into the front room. There were fewer people here now. Night had fallen, and Alfred and Matthew looked like they were saying their last goodbyes to those who remained. Feliciano prepared himself to hurry past, but Alfred noticed him almost immediately. He broke away from the small group, took Feliciano's arm before he could escape, and again drew him into a corner.

"Listen, I've been thinking. Your Resistenza, you don't… uh… bust people out of prison and things like that, do you?" Alfred winked and Feliciano furrowed his brows in confusion.

"Okay. So, if I tell you this… if I give you this information… remember, what you were asking me earlier…"

Feliciano was stunned as he started to understand. Ludwig had been taken prisoner... Feliciano had asked Alfred where...He gasped in realisation. "Why would you tell me that?"

Alfred looked hesitant for a moment before he sighed, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small photograph. Feliciano took it slowly, his pulse quickening a little. It was a light haired, handsome young guy with bushy eyebrows glaring angrily at the camera. He was wearing a suit and standing before a cabinet filled with dozens of bottles and glasses. Feliciano looked up at Alfred curiously, and Alfred's eyes burned into his. "If it was him, I'd take on the whole German military single-handed."

Ohhh. So Alfred understood after all... Feliciano felt slightly calmer, less confused, as he studied the photograph. "He looks angry."

"He didn't want me to take a photograph. I told him there was no film."

"What is his name?"

"Arthur." Alfred smiled as he said it.

Feliciano glanced at the photograph once more before handing it back. "Is he English? He's wearing a suit, so I thought he might be English."

"Yes, he's English."

"I bet he knows lots about poetry."

"He knows lots about everything. He's really smart."

"They usually are, English people."

"Now." Alfred put the photograph back in his pocket and again stared into Feliciano's eyes intently. Feliciano felt a shudder run through him, and the impossible suddenly seemed somehow within reach. "I didn't give you this information, and you aren't going to use it to do anything drastic, are you?"

Feliciano did not respond, but his eyes widened and his chest filled with nervous hope. He wondered how much bourbon Alfred had consumed, and whether he would later regret this. But Feliciano stayed silent, waiting to hear what Alfred had to say, waiting for what might be his last hope to see Ludwig, his only chance. Alfred nodded abruptly.

"I'm going to take that as a no. Now listen."

To be continued...

Chapter 13

"Are you insane?"

"Lovino, if you'd just listen…"

"I knew I was right not to trust those Americans! I can't believe they would be so irresponsible! To put this stupid idea in your head…"

"It's not stupid! It's the only chance I've got, and I can't do it alone..."

"How can you even ask me this?"

"Because you're my brother, and…"

"You are completely mad if you think for one second that I am going to help you with this, if I am going to let you…"

"You did it for Antonio!"

"That was completely different!"

"How?"

"How? Antonio was an ally being tortured by the Gestapo for information on us, not an enemy being held by the Americans!"

Feliciano finally paused. He spread his hands on the bench before him, tried to calm his rapid pulse and heavy breathing, to think clearly and coherently. The afternoon sun flooded the kitchen and broken silence punctuated his and Lovino's shouting outbursts. Feliciano knew that in the end it was probably useless to try and convince Lovino. But he also knew that he had to try for any chance he could. Because he had to see Ludwig. Even if it was only one more time, Feliciano had to see him. "Does it make a difference who is holding him prisoner?"

"Of course it does!" shouted Lovino, his eyes wide and wild, his expression outraged and frustrated. Feliciano knew he did not understand. Of course he did not understand. "The Americans do not torture their prisoners…"

"How can we know that for sure?" Feliciano felt guilty speaking of this when Lovino was still so broken from what had happened to Antonio. But he had no other choice right now. "The Americans are our allies, of course they are going to tell us that! And even if they don't torture him, don't you see, he will be sent to a prison camp, he might never get out! They'll lock him up for the rest of the war, and that could be forever, and at best he will eventually be sent back to Germany after the war is over and I'll never see him again and I can't bear that, Lovino, I can't... I'm begging you…" The tears Feliciano had tried so hard to hold back

finally stung his eyes and threatened to spill. He gritted his teeth and blinked them back angrily. "Please help me." Lovino just looked at him like he really had gone insane.

"Just stop and think for a moment what you are asking me to do. To help you rescue an enemy."

"But he's not an enemy, Lovino, he's not just a German, he is Ludwig, he is the man I love, he is a good, decent man who deserves a chance, deserves better than a prison camp for the next fifty years!"

"If Grandpa were here…"

"Well, he's not here!" Grandpa Roma had left the day before, to carry news and information to Antonio's contacts all over the country. After all, someone had to inform other pockets of the resistance of what was going on. "And he won't be back for weeks yet, so you can't get him to stop me, and you can't…"

"None of this matters!" Lovino was turning red, his words growing louder and louder. "If, against logic and reason and all the odds, you manage to break him free of the Americans, what then? What can you do then? You have a location. That is all! You have no way to make it into this location, you have no information on how he is being held, you have no idea even what to do once this German is freed! You have nothing!"

It was true. Everything Lovino said was true. And yet… "But there must be… must be some way…"

Lovino raised his eyes to the ceiling and turned away in frustration. "I'm not listening to this anymore. You are being completely unreasonable." Lovino pushed through the door to the front room. Feliciano hurried behind him.

"But Lovino, I don't know what else to do, and if Ludwig…"

"Ludwig."

Feliciano almost ran into Lovino as he halted abruptly before him. Feliciano broke off mid-sentence and choked back a gasp. A tingling shock ran through his body, rooting him to the spot. Lovino did not move an inch, even as he managed to speak, softly and calmly. "Antonio. You're awake."

Antonio stared blankly at the wall, his eyes round and dark and lost. He stood uncertain and confused in the middle of the room, clutching his shattered, ruined arm in its sling. He looked even thinner standing up. But then, the last time Lovino had gotten him to eat was three days ago. The last time he had gotten him to speak was even longer. "Ludwig," said Antonio again, still staring at the wall. His voice was flat and rough. "Ludwig flies planes."

"Yes," said Lovino slowly, taking a careful step closer. "He is Feliciano's friend." Feliciano glanced at Lovino worriedly, but the smallest, slightest spark of hope glowed in his brother's face. He took another cautious step towards Antonio. "Do you want to eat something, Antonio? Or shall we go outside? Are you…"

Antonio did not notice him. "I gave him a grey one. He put it together with glue and string. He hung it from his ceiling." Silence fell. Antonio finally tore his gaze from the wall and glanced blankly around the room. He seemed to have forgotten where he was, why he was there. His eyes finally landed on Lovino and focused just slightly. "You were yelling."

Lovino shook his head. "No, that's nothing, Antonio, it's nothing." He took another step closer and held his hand out, palm upward, his eyes wide and pleading. "Come. Let's go into the garden."

But Antonio's words made Feliciano's mind start turning. Several memories hit him at once. Overhearing Antonio speaking about his German soldier friend whose little brother was a pilot at the nearby base; Ludwig mentioning that his brother Gilbert had a Spanish friend before the war; Antonio's shock and laughing relief upon hearing the name of Feliciano's German friend who had just found out about the resistance. A suspicion started to grow in Feliciano's mind; one that was surely ridiculous yet somehow made sense, one which might yet prove the last hope he had. "Antonio," said Feliciano quietly, calmly. "Antonio, do you know Ludwig? Ludwig Beilschmidt? The German pilot."

Lovino shot him a warning glare but Feliciano ignored him, just waited with a pounding heart for Antonio's response. Antonio looked from Lovino to the ceiling. "He has a brother. A soldier."

"Yes," said Feliciano breathlessly, scared to let himself believe this. "Yes, Gilbert!"

"Feli," said Lovino warningly.

"Gilbert." Antonio's eyes closed, his face finally twisting in emotion, pained and distressed. "We fought. He left. I told him not to join the army… told him the truth… he wouldn't listen… never listened..."

Lovino spoke soothingly, even as he glared at Feliciano with wide, angry eyes. "Antonio, it's all okay, that doesn't matter now."

But Feliciano barely noticed. Hope rose in his chest. Antonio knew Ludwig… Antonio could help him… if he could stay calm and awake for just a little while, just long enough to answer some questions… "So you know! You know Ludwig! You know he is a good person, tell Lovino, tell him…"

"Feliciano, stop it!"

Feliciano had to ask, had to keep going, had no other choice… "He has been captured, Antonio, by the Americans. Is there anything you know, is there anything…" Feliciano was cut off as Lovino grabbed his arm roughly, hissed furiously.

"Don't you dare upset him. Don't you DARE, Feliciano, do NOT…"

"The Americans are good to their prisoners," said Antonio slowly. "The Americans are good, they don't… don't torture…" He blinked a few times, his eyebrows drawing together. Feliciano choked on his words and Lovino's hand tightened on his arm. Antonio's breath

came faster. "Don't break… don't drown…" Suddenly Antonio shook with a violent tremor and he broke off raggedly, clutched his shattered arm with a trembling hand. He took a gasping gulp for air before bending over as he was hit by a fierce coughing fit. Lovino swore and ran to him.

"It's okay, Antonio, it's..."

"Can't breathe... can't…"

"Yes you can, just stand up straight."

Antonio jerked away from Lovino, lifted his shaking hand to his head, choked out words through his coughs. "Can't… can't… drowning…"

"You're not drowning." Lovino reached up and grasped Antonio's hand, bringing it between them. He gently drew Antonio to sit on the couch and then sat beside him, stroking his hair, speaking calmly and quietly. "You're safe, you're with me. You can breathe, and you're okay." Antonio's breath started to even, but his face was still white, his eyes still dark and panicked. He took deep gulps of air and tried again to clutch his arm, but Lovino pulled his hand away.

No, no… Feliciano covered his mouth with his hands, horrified that he had started Antonio remembering. The one thing they were never to do. "Don't break…" Antonio was whispering now. "Don't drown…" His shoulders fell, his hand went limp in Lovino's hold. His entire body seemed to slow and stop.

"No, Antonio, no!" Lovino's voice was thick with sudden fear, but he still tried to speak evenly. "Look at me, Antonio. You're not there, do you hear me? You're here, you're here at home, you're safe now, all right?" Antonio started to turn away, so Lovino grasped his head and turned it back, his voice taking on an edge of panic. "No, please look at me, don't go away, don't…" Antonio finally stilled completely and his eyes unfocused, glazed over, stared unseeing. Lovino gulped back a strangled sob, pressed his hands to Antonio's face, spoke desperately. "Stay with me Antonio, please stay…" But Antonio's eyes were empty, his expression blank, his body frozen. He wasn't there anymore.

Lovino stared at Antonio for a few heavy moments, his harsh breathing the only sound in the room. Feliciano barely dared to breathe himself. Finally, Lovino closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, bunched his hands into fists. Then he glared up at Feliciano, his lips in a snarl, his eyes bright and wet and blazing. When he spoke it was almost a growl. "And you think for a second that I would help you rescue a German."

A horrible, sickening guilt gnawed at Feliciano's gut and crawled in his mind. How could he have been so selfish? How could he have pushed so far, so much? How could he have so quickly forced Antonio back into himself when this had been the first time he had left his bed in a week? Feliciano felt so desperately ashamed he wanted to scream. Instead he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Lovino angrily wiped his eyes, turning them from Feliciano to Antonio. Then he gently brushed Antonio's hair from his forehead, took Antonio's unbroken hand in both his own, and settled back against the couch beside him. "Go away, Feliciano."

Feliciano sat against the oak tree, the countryside familiar and lonely, the grass too bright and too harsh, the sun unwelcome. He never felt such aching loneliness as he did under this tree. And yet, there was nowhere else he could go. Every day drew him here, here to his and Ludwig's somewhere else. Every day the same thoughts, the same fears, the same unbearable longing. How could the world be so unkind, so unfair? How could this awful war bring him and Lovino such happiness, and then be the very thing to take it away? Was this how life worked? It made no sense, none of it, and nothing was simple anymore, nothing ever would be, the way it had been when Ludwig looked in his eyes or held him close. When Ludwig was all he knew, and everything was simple.

Feliciano held the photograph of Ludwig before him. He had gazed at it so many times that the image was imprinted on his mind. Ludwig sitting on a ruined church wall, iron cross at his neck, looking sternly at the camera with his straight blond hair slightly blown from the wind and a sort of glow in his handsome face. Then Feliciano turned the photograph over and read the words scrawled on the back. *auf wiedersehen, sweetheart…* Could Feliciano really say goodbye? Could he let Ludwig go, accept that this was too hard, and live forever on his memories of a few beautiful winter days, otherworldly mornings, storm battered nights? Only a few days to last a lifetime. How could only a few days be enough to build a dream and tear it down, to give you everything and leave you with nothing?

Feliciano looked up and glanced across the wind-blown grass, and for just a second he swore could see the outline of Ludwig in the distance, walking away. No. Feliciano shook his head and turned the photograph back around, running his fingers gently over the image of Ludwig's face. Feliciano would do whatever he had to do. And if no one would help him, he would do it alone. He would get Ludwig back. He had no choice; from the moment Ludwig had looked at him with those sky blue eyes, Feliciano never had a choice. Lovino had done it for Antonio. *And you think for a second that I would help you rescue a German.* Alfred would do it for Arthur. *If it was him, I'd take on the whole German military single-handed.* And Feliciano knew that Ludwig would do the same for him. *I'd let it burn for you…* So Feliciano would do it for Ludwig. If he succeeded, if he failed, if it was the last thing he ever did. The conclusion was easy to reach, was the same as it had been months ago when Feliciano had first considered the danger of loving Ludwig. It had never changed. If Ludwig wasn't worth the risk, then nothing was.

The house was dark and silent and empty when Feliciano walked through the front door. He did not check the bedrooms - Antonio was probably asleep, and Lovino most likely watching him. Feliciano felt another stab of guilt, and wondered how long it would be before Lovino spoke to him again. Feliciano wouldn't blame him if he never did. He headed into the kitchen to start dinner - hopefully Lovino would eat something tonight. Lately he was eating almost as little as Antonio. Turning on the lamps, Feliciano noticed a small pouch on the bench with a thick envelope beside it. A note sat on top. Feliciano quickly grabbed it and gasped when he recognised Antonio's handwriting.

Write down the location of Ludwig's imprisonment and put it in this envelope. The information I have placed inside will take care of the rest. Take it to the Cantina Rosso. Ask for the Turk.

Feliciano read the words thirty times. He could not comprehend them - could not believe them. Of course he knew that Antonio had moments of clarity - short periods of time where he broke out of his state of waking sleep and spoke coherently, understood where he was, was almost himself again – yet this left Feliciano stunned. Antonio must have heard and understood far more than Feliciano realised. Feliciano quickly pulled the pages out of the envelope and his shock deepened as he skimmed over the contents. Asking for a German contact... discussing payment... something about needing a plan... Feliciano tried to believe it. Antonio was actually helping him. After everything the Germans had done… The kitchen door creaked and Feliciano turned.

"You are going to do this even without me, aren't you?" Lovino's eyes were hard, his arms folded. He glanced at the paper in Feliciano's hand, and Feliciano could see immediately that he knew the contents. Feliciano wondered how aware Antonio had been while he wrote it, if he had given Lovino a few of those rare, lucid moments he lived for.

"Yes," Feliciano replied. "Yes I am."

"You could get yourself killed, Feliciano. You could die for this German."

"Lovino, you could have died rescuing Antonio. Did that stop you?"

They stared at each other wordlessly, the air silent and charged between them. Feliciano begged Lovino silently to understand. Feliciano had thought he couldn't... and yet, at the same time, surely Lovino understood better than anyone. Lovino finally nodded and let out a resigned sigh. "I'll come with you, Feli. But for you. Not for him."

Feliciano's felt his chest lighten and his lips break into a wide, relieved smile. Then he laughed and bounced over to Lovino, pulling him into a squeezing embrace. "I love you, Lovino!"

Lovino patted Feliciano's back awkwardly. "Yes, yes, I know." He let Feliciano hold him for just a moment before pulling away, though his own lips were curved in a tiny smile. "Now." Lovino looked down at the letter. "You're taking that letter on your own, all right? I'm not having anymore to do with this than I have to."

"That's fine, that's okay, I don't mind!" For the first time in months, even more so than when Alfred had told him Ludwig's location, Feliciano felt himself filled with a light, soaring hope. This might work. This might be possible. This might just mean he would see Ludwig again. Soon.

Feliciano drummed his fingers nervously on the table, biting the nails of his other hand as his eyes darted around the crowded Cantina Rosso. It was strange to see groups of American serviceman rather than German soldiers mingling inside the cantina and out around the street tables where Feliciano sat. Feliciano continued to glance around impatiently. He had given the envelope to a man behind the counter, asked for the Turk, and been told to wait. But he had been sitting at this same table since morning and now the sun was already descending in the sky. It did not help his nerves to remember that this was the very table he had been sitting at months ago, when Ludwig had met him unexpectedly and dragged him away from the

execution in the square. Memories of Ludwig surrounded him. And the idea that he might soon see Ludwig once again, hold him again, feel him and kiss him and fall again into those blue eyes – it was heart stopping, breathtaking. His blood thrummed with fearful, hopeful, glorious anticipation… and how long was he going to be made to wait?

Just when Feliciano was wondering if he should head back into the cantina and ask, someone pulled out the chair opposite him and took a seat at the table. Feliciano gasped in recognition. The same dark skin, the same dark hair on his head and face, the same little red hat with the black tassel… this was the very man who had given him that envelope the last time Feliciano had been in this cantina. So this must be the Turk. He grinned at Feliciano as he sat. "Hello again, little Resistenza. Have you remembered your code this time?"

Feliciano's eyes went wide. "I wasn't given one. Was I supposed to be given one? Oh no… it's really me, honest, I can…"

"Calm down, kid, I'm just messing with you. So," the Turk pulled a few sheets of paper from the unsealed envelope, then unfolded and smoothed them on the table. "We have some business to deal with. Very hush hush."

"Very… what?"

"Top secret. Quiet."

"Oh, I suppose. I don't really know…"

The Turk looked down at the letter. "You need a contact. A small group of German military to receive a Luftwaffe Lieutenant recently released illegally from American custody. Yes?"

Feliciano's breath stuttered unevenly, the nerves in his stomach flooding his head and his veins. "Yes," he whispered. He was surprised and reassured at how coherently Antonio had managed to explain everything in the letter. "Yes, that's exactly what I need."

"And you also need a plan of escape for this Luftwaffe Lieutenant."

"Oh. I do?"

The Turk looked taken aback. "Of course you do, what did you think, that you could just walk right in there and ask them nicely to let him go? Shit, kid, I thought you were a resistance member."

Feliciano managed to feel a little annoyed through his shock. "I was never allowed on any missions or anything like that. My brother Lovino was, though, and he's going to be with me, so he can take care of all that…"

"He stays in the car."

"Oh." Feliciano's stomach fell. "He does?"

"Of course. You need that car running and ready to tear out of there. And two of you walking into an American base is going to be far too suspicious."

Feliciano gulped, the apprehension in his stomach quickly turning to fear. He had thought at least that Lovino would be with him… that's what he had begged for. The idea that Lovino wouldn't be by Feliciano's side the entire time had not even occurred to him. "So… um… what do I do, then?"

The Turk raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps we should discuss payment before things go any further." Feliciano nodded. He wasn't sure why Antonio had given him old gold coins instead of paper notes to use as payment, but he hastily drew the pouch of coins from his pocket and threw it on the table. The Turk immediately snatched it out of sight and quickly looked around the room. "Shit, kid, be a bit careful, would ya?"

"Sorry," mumbled Feliciano. He knew he should know better, but all sense was being jumbled and knocked by his ragged nerves and edgy thoughts. He was actually here, discussing Ludwig, discussing how to break him out of an American base. This was crazy, it was wonderful, it was the most terrifying thing Feliciano had ever faced. How could he be expected to keep control, to know how to act? Oh God, he was going to see Ludwig soon, it was really going to happen… The Turk just studied the coins under the table for a moment before nodding, satisfied.

"Right. I suppose I should thank you for not insulting me with worthless pieces of paper. Now." He fixed Feliciano with a heavy, dark stare. Feliciano could barely sit still in his seat. "You're lucky. The base where this German is being held isn't a very large one, and he is currently their only prisoner awaiting transport to a POW camp. It's mainly military police, which you'd think would make it a tougher target. But these Americans have one major weakness."

"Oh! Pretty girls."

The Turk blinked silently a few times. "What?"

"Grandpa Roma says that all the Americans like pretty girls, so that must be their weakness, he says the smarmy bastards are always trying to steal Italian women and oh no, you're not going to make me dress up as a girl are you? Only, I don't think that will work actually, because the American I met didn't have a weakness for pretty girls at all, *actually*..."

"Shut up, kid. No, I'm talking about drinking."

"Drinking with pretty girls, I bet."

"Right, fine, probably. You gonna listen now?"

Feliciano bit back a response and just nodded.

"Good. Now. Tuesday nights, the Americans go drinking in the neighbouring village. This week they'll leave only a few military guards behind."

"Why?" asked Feliciano restlessly.

"I'll deal with that." The Turk grinned. "This is what you're paying me for, kid. Your…" The Turk looked back at the letter. "Your brother, is it… will park on the east road."

"East road," repeated Feliciano. He was already starting to worry that he could not keep up with this.

"You enter the compound. There will be only one man at the gate. Now, this is what you're gonna say. You listening?"

"Yes!" said Feliciano eagerly, breathlessly, almost hanging off the edge of his seat. The Turk eyed him doubtfully, then rubbed his forehead and muttered under his breath. Feliciano didn't catch it, but the Turk continued loudly.

"You're gonna tell him there's an incident in town, that the Americans have lost control. Say they're fighting, that they're armed, and that the villagers are angry, scared and don't know what to do. The last thing the Americans want is a diplomatic incident now that they've finally got a foothold in this country, so this should see most of the remaining guards heading straight for the town. Now, you've got a weapon, don't you?"

Feliciano's blood froze as it all suddenly became real. He couldn't do this. Oh God, how could he possibly do this... "I... I don't... I… but what if they don't go? What if they don't believe me?"

"Why wouldn't they believe you? You're a picture of innocence. And of course they'll believe you when the very situation you'll mention has occurred twice already."

"It has?"

"By Tuesday it will have." The Turk winked at Feliciano's puzzled expression. "This is what you're paying me for, remember? Now with the majority of the Americans leaving the base to defuse the situation in town, you'll probably only have one or two guards left to deal with. With the element of surprise, surely you can deal with one or two guards."

Feliciano was horrified. "But I don't want to hurt them! Isn't there something else I can do?"

The Turk looked both amused and slightly incredulous. "Kid, this game you're playing is a little out of your league." He gave a short laugh as he pulled something from his pocket, a small packet, and passed it under the table to Feliciano. "Slip it into a drink - a canteen of bourbon if you can get it. Tell them it's a gift from their American buddies in town." The Turk grinned. "In compensation for all the fun they're missing out on."

Feliciano bit his lip uncertainly as he turned the little packet of white powder over in his fingers. "But it won't hurt them?"

"Nah kid, it'll knock 'em senseless, give 'em the best dream they ever had."

"Is it medicine for people who can't sleep? Grandpa Roma sometimes makes medicine like that with valerian and lavender from the garden."

The Turk snickered softly in amusement. "Bit stronger than lavender. Some people would pay a right sum for that. Use it wisely, hey?"

Feliciano nodded and pushed the packet into his pocket. "What… what then?"

"Then you enter the cells, grab your German, and run like hell to your waiting car." The Turk tossed a small set of keys to Feliciano, who caught them awkwardly. "Your German contacts will be waiting at this location, Tuesday, at 0100 hours." The Turk pushed a few sheets of paper across the table and Feliciano folded them carefully before putting them in his pocket beside the keys and little powder packet. "Get this German there, at that time, but this is very important. Do not go directly to the contact point. Stop at a safe distance, and he will need to make the last few miles or so on his own."

Feliciano nodded, tried to focus, to convince himself he could do this. He wasn't having much luck with either. "I… oh. But… but… but how…"

The Turk's expression softened just slightly. "You know kid, once you're in this situation, you'd be surprised how quickly instinct takes over. Don't worry so much."

Feliciano was already forgetting everything the Turk had said, his words just a jumble of half-formed images in Feliciano's mind. "But I don't know…"

"Read the papers I gave you. Everything you need to know is there. And remember one thing."

Feliciano took a very deep breath and tried to stop his hands from shaking. "What's that?"

"If it wasn't worth it, you wouldn't be doing it." The Turk winked again. "And Carriedo wouldn't have written this letter asking for my help, either." The Turk pushed back his chair as though to leave, but then stopped and looked at the table thoughtfully. "How's the Spaniard doing, anyway?"

"Oh." Feliciano thought about how to answer that. It was a far too difficult question. "Well, mostly he sleeps. Sometimes he looks like he's awake but he just stares at the wall - Grandpa Roma says he's sleeping with his eyes open. And when he is awake he usually just says a lot of things that don't make sense. But sometimes - just sometimes - he really wakes up. It doesn't usually last long, but Lovino says he's getting better." Feliciano shrugged. He didn't know if Lovino was right about that.

"Hmm." The Turk shook his head. "From what I heard the bastard's lucky to be alive. Or not, depending how you look at it." He caught Feliciano's eyes in an intense stare. "Lovino... he's your brother, yes? He's the one who rescued him?"

"Yes."

The Turk whistled, impressed. "Heard what he did. He's one brave little bastard."

Feliciano smiled. "Yes."

"And now he's helping you do the same thing. For a German."

Feliciano shifted uncomfortably. "Yes." The Turk shook his head again.

"Why? Why is this worth it?"

Feliciano answered immediately, without thinking. "Because I love him."

The Turk looked vaguely amused. "This war just don't make sense anymore. But hey. Gold is worth the same whoever you get it from." The Turk stood to leave.

"And you?" asked Feliciano suddenly, surprising himself that he asked. "Why is what you do worth it? Is that gold in your pocket the only thing that matters?" Feliciano felt suddenly afraid as the Turk smirked down at him, one dark eyebrow raised in amusement. Feliciano shrank back into his chair.

"It's the only thing that lasts, little Resistenza. You'll learn that soon enough."

Feliciano didn't believe him. There were things worth more than gold. Things that lasted longer. Things like flowers, and winter afternoons, and photographs with goodbyes scrawled on the back. "Love lasts."

"Nice sentiment, kid." And for the briefest second, a flash of bitter memory seemed to pass over the Turk's face; as if he knew what Feliciano meant, as if he understood. But it was gone before Feliciano could be sure he had seen it. "But it's not true. Regardless. Good luck, little Italian." The Turk laughed as he walked away. "Boy, are you gonna need it."

Feliciano couldn't believe how easily the plan was working. After reluctantly leaving Lovino in the car the Turk had arranged for them, Feliciano had rounded the small bend to the American base. It was not the iron prison he had expected, but just a small collection of buildings surrounded by barbed wire and a lot of trees. Somehow, the Turk had managed it so that only a few military guards remained and, to Feliciano's relief, the guard at the gate believed his story immediately. Feliciano was shown into the base, past the small buildings and trucks and trees and a barred door, which he promptly knew to be the cells. And now he sat in this small room, opposite the base commander and the one remaining guard, with his palms sweating and his heart hammering and his head swimming as he fought to keep control. Everything was like a dream, nothing felt real, and it was so hard to believe he was actually doing this; that it was actually working. The commander leaned back in his chair and peered discerningly at Feliciano over his desk.

"So what exactly is the situation, Italian?"

Feliciano told himself to stay calm, it's okay, they don't suspect, they don't know, oh God, Ludwig was in the cell right next door... Feliciano tried to recite the speech he had read a hundred times in attempts to memorise. "Well, uh, sir, it's just that your soldiers are all in town drinking too much and being very loud and rude and flirting with pretty girls, probably, and now they're all angry and fighting and breaking things and this is the third time this week and people are getting all upset and worried and we don't know what to do about it or how to stop it and the Germans never acted like this when they were in town. Sir."

The commander gave a small hum of disappointment under his breath before glancing up at the military guard. "I've told them fifty times *not* to upset the local population. Just when we're trying to get the locals to trust us."

"Always seems to happen when we're understaffed, too, sir."

As the two Americans spoke between themselves, Feliciano continued to try and control his terror, to stop himself shaking all over. This was not a situation he ever thought he would be involved in. This was what Grandpa Roma and Antonio and maybe sometimes Lovino did, this was too much for Feliciano, and now he had to try and get them to drink the laced bourbon, and just how was he supposed to do this? The guns at the Americans sides drew Feliciano's gaze like a magnet. What if they didn't take the drink? What would he do then? How could he leave, knowing Ludwig was right there, so close, so close Feliciano could feel him... "Oh!" he shouted suddenly, the word tearing from his throat almost unbidden. The Americans stared at him as Feliciano reached into his jacket and pulled out the flask. Just do this... just do it and get to Ludwig... "Your friends gave me this." Surely they wouldn't take it... surely it was too obvious... why hadn't he brought a gun...

"They did now?"

Feliciano gained a tiny bit of courage at the interested way the Americans eyed the metal flask. "Yes," Feliciano continued. "To give to you, they said it was a gift from town since you couldn't be there, they said you would need a drink, it's some strange American drink called bourbon I think..."

The commander stared for a few tense, heart-pounding, unbearable moments. Then he smiled. "I tell ya, it's been a long time since I had a drink."

Feliciano *really* couldn't believe how easily the plan was working. He looked from the sleeping commander to the unconscious guard; sweat drenching his back and neck, pulse racing so fast he felt dizzy. He waited a few anxious minutes to make sure they were fully senseless, barely daring to breathe, expecting them to wake any second. When they didn't, when Feliciano finally managed to convince himself this was working, he scrambled to his feet and bolted out the door as fast as he could go. Ludwig was so close.

Feliciano raced back to the cells, glancing from side to side as he did. But the base was empty - the guards had left immediately to take care of the situation in town. Feliciano threw open the unlocked front door of the cells and came to an immediate halt. A long, narrow, silent corridor stretched out before him, six doors leading into six tiny jail cells, three on each side. The lights were lit only dimly, the majority of illumination coming from the moonlight that filtered through the tiny windows and threw shadows of bars onto the grey floor. Feliciano took a few cautious steps, caught in a strange waking dream. His feet echoed like thunderclaps on the cold cement. He swallowed past the heavy pounding in his throat and tried to find his voice, but it came out as a whisper. "Ludwig?" No response. He tried again, managing to speak a little louder, though his voice cracked slightly on the single word. "Ludwig?"

Frantic footfalls echoed off the stone walls and a long shadow fell across the corridor. And then, standing at the bars of the last cell on the left, he was there. His uniform still pressed and pristine; his face frozen in the moonlight, beyond stunned, just dazed and disbelieving as he gazed across at Feliciano. He shook his head, once, as though refusing to believe it.

"Ludwig…" A whisper, slow and quiet. Suddenly everything was slow and quiet. The moon stopped in the sky; the ground stopped spinning below. Feliciano took a slow, quiet breath as the entire world came to a halt, turned around, remade itself around him. Because he was there. *Ludwig...*

"No."

That one, strong word of denial was enough to force Feliciano into focus. He ran. When he reached the last cell Ludwig thrust his hand through the bar and gripped Feliciano's. Feliciano gasped, lungs forcing the breath from him, and he clung to Ludwig as his other hand fumbled frantically for the keys. "Ludwig, we have to go, we…"

"No! NO! What are you doing? How… how are you here?" A ray of moonlight shone through the bars onto Ludwig's face, beautiful and shocked and bewildered, even as he gripped Feliciano's hand and reached through the bars to touch his cheek. Feliciano cried out, almost sobbed at the touch, tried to fit a key in the lock. Why wouldn't it fit, why wouldn't his hands stop shaking...

"Someone gave me information, but it doesn't matter, I'm…" Another wrong key. Feliciano almost screamed in frustration.

"You have to get out of here! You have to leave! Don't you know what they could do to you, don't you see… is this even…" Ludwig's words turned into incomprehensible German. But even as he said them, white and confounded and shaking his head disbelievingly, he took the keys from Feliciano and fitted one into the lock with an almost steady hand. Feliciano reached through the bars to grasp Ludwig's arms and touch his face, to convince himself he was there.

"There is a contact waiting for you. We have a car. We can take you there. The guards are asleep, but we need to hurry… we need to…" The key fitted. It started to turn.

"So stupid… *Mein Gott*, Feliciano, this was so stupid…" Ludwig's breath came fast and frantic.

So close, too close. Feliciano's entire body was a tightly wound coil of impatience and need. The lock clicked, they both gasped, and Feliciano had to briefly tear his hands from Ludwig's arms as the door flung open. But then Ludwig's hands grasped him roughly and pulled him close; and Feliciano reached for him, fell into him; and their lips met with a breathless, wordless, fearless intensity. And again everything stopped. This grey cell disappeared, became a wide, open field with yellow grass and flowers and sunshine, with bright blue skies and an endless afternoon and a single, gnarled old oak tree. They were somewhere else, and it was only them in the entire world, and this was what Feliciano had waited for, this was what mattered, this was the reason he did this and the reason he risked everything and the reason he kept breathing. Ludwig smelt the same, felt the same, tasted the same; Feliciano's heart

soared the way it always did, and he was complete for the first time since that long ago night he had fallen asleep in a bed of hay under a rain-pelted roof. All the broken pieces came together and Feliciano felt he could die happily, here, in Ludwig's arms. But the kiss was too brief, and when Ludwig pulled away his eyes were like fire. "I don't know how you're here. But you need to go." Yet he still held to Feliciano with a grip like iron.

Feliciano shook his head firmly, clinging to Ludwig's arms with determined, shaking hands. "I won't go without you."

Ludwig closed his eyes briefly in resignation. "Then come, immediately." He dropped his grip from Feliciano's waist to take his hand. Then he grabbed a jacket off a small table and pulled Feliciano out of the cell into the corridor.

Feliciano followed as Ludwig led the way out of the narrow cells, their feet echoing like gunshots on the bar-shadowed ground, outside into the calm, still, empty night. This was all suddenly happening too fast for Feliciano to register how he felt besides the heavy pounding of his heart and the comforting relief he felt from having Ludwig's hand in his.

"Guards?" asked Ludwig shortly, eyes darting vigilantly around the empty base.

"Only two, but they are sleeping."

"Sleep..." Ludwig shook his head. "Never mind. Which way?"

Feliciano took the lead and led Ludwig past the buildings and trucks and wire towards the front gate. "Here. Follow me. Lovino's waiting… oh, Ludwig!" Feliciano turned and smiled delightedly up at Ludwig, the moonlight brightening their faces and the warm, quiet night around them. "Ludwig, you can meet Lovino!"

Ludwig's expression softened unreadably and he pressed a fierce kiss to Feliciano's hand. They ran out the front gate, onto the tree-lined narrow lane, and rounded the corner to where Lovino waited with the borrowed car.

"Lovino," said Feliciano breathlessly as he threw open the door and fell in, Ludwig clambering in beside him, their hands still clasped together. "This is Ludwig."

Lovino's eyes flashed furiously as he quickly inspected the German. He turned back to face the road and switched on the gleaming headlights. "Not a word, German, do you hear me?" Lovino spoke angrily in English, slamming his foot to the accelerator, tyres screeching against the dirt road. "Not one word to me."

Once in the safety of the car, Feliciano fell onto Ludwig, exhausted and giddy and overcome. He could not believe they had managed it, could not believe what he had just done, and a hysterical, joyful relief rushed like a flooding release through his veins. He could only laugh, and cry, and gasp for breath; and Ludwig held him close, ran a hand through his hair, rocked him gently and kissed his head and whispered soft, meaningless words. Feliciano breathed in against his chest. The smell of Ludwig's jacket and the feel of Ludwig's strong arms around him quickly soothed and calmed Feliciano's overworked mind and nerves. And it felt like

only another day they had been parted, because everything was again the same: this familiar bliss, this feeling of everything being right that Feliciano remembered so well.

Finally able to think clearly, to breathe properly, Feliciano ran his hands over Ludwig's arms and chest, kissed his shoulder awkwardly. "Did they hurt you?" he whispered.

Ludwig kept running his hand soothingly through Feliciano's hair. "No, Feliciano. No."

Feliciano sighed with relief. "I'm so glad. Everyone said the Americans were good to their prisoners, but I worried, oh Ludwig, I was so worried, I was so scared that you..."

"It is all right now. I am well, and unhurt, and it's all okay now."

Feliciano nodded and wiped his eyes. "Your contact will be waiting just around the corner when we stop. Go straight to them, and they will take you to the nearest German base."

"How did you even… oh, Feliciano. You should not have done this. This was too dangerous, too reckless, this was not worth it…"

Feliciano lifted his head and stared straight into Ludwig's blue eyes. They were clouded with concern. "Yes, yes Ludwig, you are worth it. Now you have to go back to your unit, and you have to survive for me, please. And when this is all over you have to come back to me, just like you said you would, because if you don't then I will come for you, all right?"

Ludwig smiled just slightly, his eyes slowly softening. "Yes, Feliciano."

Feliciano closed his eyes, felt Ludwig's voice soothe away all his fears and fill his chest with warmth. "I just, I can't believe I'm with you again, I can't believe you're…"

"I'm here, Feliciano." Ludwig pressed a kiss to the top of Feliciano's head. Feliciano smiled as he heard those familiar words, the ones Ludwig always knew to say when Feliciano needed to hear them. "I'm here with you."

Feliciano leant against Ludwig's chest, felt his breathing; listened to the steady rumble of the car engine as he stared out the window at the dark, star dusted sky. No other cars passed them on the long, narrow road leading towards the northern village, and Feliciano wondered briefly if he should ask Lovino to just keep driving on to Switzerland. He almost laughed at what Lovino would say. But at the same time, Feliciano reminded himself to thank his brother later for staying silent as he drove. It was probably taking him an effort to do so.

Feliciano traced aimless circles on Ludwig's arm. He did not want this drive to end. The thought that they would soon reach their destination, that Ludwig would leave again, cast a shadow on this brief, bright moment. Of course Feliciano wanted to just keep going, still wanted to run somewhere there could be a place for them, but he knew now that was impossible. War continued, and Feliciano had to go home, and Ludwig had to go back where he was safe. But Feliciano also knew that war would end one day, and when it did, they would be together. "I heard your plane went down."

"Yes."

"Is Greta all right?"

Feliciano felt Ludwig's chest rise sharply. "No. No she is not."

"Oh." Feliciano kissed Ludwig's shoulder again. "I'm sorry, Ludwig. Will you get a new plane? What will you call her?"

Ludwig hummed thoughtfully, his hand twisting in Feliciano's hair. "I think… Bella."

Feliciano shook his head, smiling, filled with joy and laughter and not a little annoyance. "Bello, Ludwig."

Ludwig's chest moved again as he laughed softly. "Very well. Bello."

Feliciano held to Ludwig as close as he could; it wasn't enough, and yet, it was everything. These few minutes were the greatest he had known for months. But the trip was too short, and all too soon those fleeting, wondrous minutes were over. The car stopped, and Feliciano felt his breath stop with it. He forced his hands to move, took a folded paper from his pocket and passed it to Ludwig. "Your contacts are waiting a few miles down this way, closer to the village, around the bend in the road. The exact destination is written on this." Ludwig looked down at the paper and put it in his front pocket, then gazed at Feliciano with conflicted, tormented eyes. He clung again to Feliciano's hands.

"How am I supposed to leave you again?"

"It's only for a little while, Ludwig." Feliciano smiled as brightly as he could manage. "And then it will be forever."

"I won't make you wait forever. I'll come back to you."

Feliciano nodded firmly. "I know."

Ludwig placed his hands on Feliciano's cheeks, wiped his tears, then leant down and kissed him. There was no need for words, because they had said everything, and how could there ever be words for a moment such as this? Now there were only memories, and the desperate, almost painful hope and belief that one day there would be more to make. And it did not matter if that was in week, a month, a year, a century. Because of course Feliciano could wait forever. What other choice did he have?

"Feliciano, for God's sake, will you hurry the hell up!" Lovino's voice cut angrily through Feliciano's hazy head.

The kiss broke slowly, reluctantly. They had no more time. Ludwig ran a hand over Feliciano's cheek, opened the door with a reluctant hand, then pressed one last kiss to Feliciano's head before he climbed out. But as soon as Feliciano's arms were left empty, he felt an agonising, unbearable tearing at his chest. He immediately clambered out after Ludwig and stumbled to his feet on the unsteady dirt road.

"Feliciano!" shouted Lovino. "Get back in this car right now!"

Feliciano ignored him. He pulled Ludwig down into an embrace, laughed breathlessly as Ludwig's arms surrounded him. "I forgot to say goodbye!" The night was eerily silent outside the car, the sky clear and unending overhead. Clusters of trees rustled in the warm scented breeze, the little country road curved ahead, and all was dark but for the soft moonlight and the little pool of light from the car headlights.

"Crazy Italian." Ludwig smiled sadly and kissed Feliciano's forehead, his cheek, his lips. But along with the crushing sadness, Feliciano knew he would see Ludwig again, so there was a hope in his chest that had not been there last time. He was not sure why, but he felt sure that this was only a short parting. Ludwig's lips caressed his softly before he finally pulled back with a shuddering sigh, smiling down regretfully. *"Bello, ciao."*

And as Feliciano gazed up at Ludwig in yet another goodbye, they were all that existed, because every time he looked in those blue eyes they were somewhere else. And everything would be okay now, because the contact would take Ludwig to the German base, and Feliciano would go home and wait, and soon this would all be over and Ludwig would come back to him. But now he had to leave. Feliciano smiled one last time, let his hands fall gently from Ludwig's chest before stepping back out of his arms.

"Auf wiedersehen, sweetheart."

The shot rang out suddenly, tore through the still air, shattered the calm, clear silence. Feliciano jolted at the deafening bang and almost gasped in shock. But for some reason he could not draw a breath. He stumbled and wondered why, then he wondered why Ludwig was staring across at his chest with a stunned, cold, terrified expression. Feliciano curiously lowered his eyes, followed Ludwig's frozen stare. He blinked a few times in hazy, unreal confusion. His shirt was stained red. "Ludwig…"

A whisper. "*Nein*..."

It took a moment to feel the pain blossoming in his chest, but then it spread like fire, until his body was engulfed and he couldn't breathe from it. Feliciano's legs went weak and the ground rose quickly to meet him. Strong, steady arms caught him, lowered him to the ground, and Ludwig's painful, strangled cry rang in his ears. "NO… *nein, nein*…"

Feliciano tried to speak. He tried to ask what was happening. But there was nothing but slicing pain tearing his chest apart and he could barely see, barely hear, barely think…

"Feliciano, look at me, open your eyes…" Ludwig's voice was panicked, terrified. Then Lovino's voice screamed through Feliciano's head.

"FELI!"

"Open your eyes, Feliciano." Ludwig shouted the words, barked them like an order. "Stay awake. Listen to me!"

Feliciano blinked his eyes, tried to keep them open. He coughed, but it hurt too much. He tried to take a breath, but his chest would not rise. He tried to focus on Ludwig's face, framed by the dark sky and a million bright stars; tried to keep his gaze on Ludwig's frantic,

darkened eyes. But everything hurt too much, and even though he tried to fight it, Feliciano could not stop his eyelids sliding shut. It was easier. He felt Ludwig grasp his face, run a hand over his cheek.

"No, *NEIN*, Feliciano... *Gott, bitte..."*

Another shot. Lovino screamed again. "Who the fuck is shooting?"

Ludwig shouted frantically in German. Loud, surprised voices answered him. White light exploded on the other side of Feliciano's eyelids.

"*O mio Dio… mio Dio*…" Lovino was panicking. Everything was coming from so far away.

"You'll be all right… it'll be all right… please, Feliciano, PLEASE open your eyes..."

Feliciano tried to obey, then tried to apologise that he couldn't. Everything was confusion. Why was everyone shouting? Why was it so cold when earlier the night had been so warm? Why didn't it hurt anymore?

And then he couldn't even try anymore. It all started to fade and a sudden awareness cut through his mind. Feliciano used to wonder if he was going to die for a free Italy. Instead, he was going to die for a German. And yet, it wasn't about that at all… it never was. If Feliciano had the strength, he would have laughed. Instead he just felt his chest grow tight as the pain drained away, the light faded, and only a faint ringing echoed in his ears.

But he could still feel Ludwig. Ludwig's arm around his back, Ludwig's hand on his face. He could still feel him and smell him and sense him, and if Feliciano had to be anywhere at this moment, he would choose right here in Ludwig's arms. He tried once more to cling to them, to Ludwig's voice, but in the end Feliciano was helpless to stop the darkness pulling him under. One last image flashed before his eyes – Ludwig holding a flower, blue eyes sparkling, smiling as the orange tinted sun warmed the long green grass around him. And just before the darkness, one last thought drifted through Feliciano's mind.

In the end, it had all been worth the risk.

To be continued...

Chapter 14

"Feli! Mio Dio, Feli… cosa faccio… non so cosa fare!"

"Schwarz Leader, another one coming down on your tail, six o'clock high, over."

"Listen to me, Lovino. I can't understand you. You have to stop panicking. He is still breathing."

"I'm on it." Ludwig manoeuvred his plane into a hard dive descent, turned abruptly, and fired. The Mustang had no chance. It exploded into a dazzling inferno against the clear blue sky. Ludwig flew over the falling wreckage and went immediately, determinedly, for the next enemy aircraft.

"You have to keep him warm during the drive, and keep this pressure on the wound. Do not stop the pressure, Lovino, understand?"

"Schwarz Leader, you are flying too erratically. I am having trouble keeping on your wing..."

"I am so sorry, sir, I did not realise... i-it was j-just… just a mistake... I swear, sir, if I had known…"

Ludwig practically snarled into his mask. "You will keep up, Schwarz Two. You will do your damn duty and you will push them back!" Another Mustang fell, spiralling towards the ground in trails of flaming smoke. Ludwig felt only the slightest rush of satisfaction before scanning the sky swiftly for his next target.

"I can't... We can't go with them! Ma è una pazzia! What if they..."

"There are too many, Schwarz Leader! Lieutenant, you're flying directly into - Beilschmidt, what the *hell* are you doing?"

"Lovino, they will take Feliciano to the nearest doctor, then leave immediately. They are just soldiers, not SS. They do not know you are Resistenza."

Ludwig couldn't stop. Enemy planes surrounded him, outnumbered his squad. But he could not stop; he could not make himself stop. This familiar, comforting chaos was the only thing that almost drowned out his memories, almost drowned out his fears. Almost. Ludwig shouted into his mask. "I am the commander of this squad, so you will follow my orders, Schwarz Two. Engage enemy aircraft!"

"They just shot him! How can we trust them? Why should I trust you?"

Turn, fire, dive, climb. Get one down, move on to the next. Keep his squad together. Focus, breathe. "This is Schwarz Leader to Schwarz squadron. We will not pull back from this. Force them into retreat. That is an order."

"Because you have no choice. I would die for him, Lovino, if I could. But this is all I can do. Now go!"

Only when the skies around him were clear did Ludwig finally feel his heart beat in his chest, his lungs fill with air. Only when there were no enemy fighters left to engage did he stop to think. An angry voice crackled through his speakers and drowned out the blood roaring in his ears. "Ground Control to Schwarz Leader. You will bring your squad back to base immediately!"

Once safely landed at the base, Ludwig leapt from his plane, his blood pounding, his head hazy with fury. He threw his headgear angrily to the ground and charged immediately to where his wingman climbed from his own plane. The man's feet had barely hit the ground before Ludwig grabbed him by the collar and slammed the shocked pilot against the side of the machine. "You will *never* question me in the middle of battle, understand? NEVER!"

The wingman looked like he was about to respond angrily, but Ludwig felt his eyes flare and the man just dropped his gaze and looked away. "Yes, sir."

Ludwig shoved him away forcefully before turning and marching across the airfield, feeling the eyes of his squad on him as he went. He headed directly for the command tent to explain himself yet again.

When Ludwig first arrived back, the military had not asked too many questions. For that, he was grateful. They accepted his made-up story of how he had escaped, sent him on to the next base, and almost before he knew it Ludwig was back to flying, back to doing what he knew best. Back to the same daily schedule, the same day in, day out, the same old black and white. And yet, something was different now. It used to be so easy. When he flew for duty, and his country was all that mattered. When he was a rising young hero of the Luftwaffe who knew nothing of true love or real fear or wide, amber eyes that glittered in early sunshine and afternoon firelight. Now, when Ludwig flew, all he wanted was the fire and the fury of it. The heat and the anger and the blood firing through his veins. Now, all he wanted was to take his mind somewhere else, and he was never quite sure if he wanted to remember or forget.

But now every memory of Feliciano was tainted. Every image of him smiling in the sunlight cut through with the image of him falling and bleeding and turning white. The look of joy and innocence on his face replaced by an expression of wrenching terror and wordless agony. The sound of his clear laughter and singing drowned out by his desperate gasping for breath. This constant turning in Ludwig's mind, this recurring, inescapable replay of events, this endless onslaught of bitter, inescapable memory. The sound of that shot, the twisted look of pain on Feliciano's beautiful face, the way he tried so hard to fight it and keep his eyes open, the way he looked up at Ludwig as though silently begging him for help.

And Ludwig could do nothing. Nothing but cling to Feliciano with desperate hands, order him, plead with him. Nothing as Ludwig's world fell apart before him, as a cold, sick terror unlike anything he had ever known engulfed his mind and body. Nothing as he yelled, confounded, at the German patrol soldiers, as they apologised for their stupid, pointless, world-ending mistake. As Lovino panicked beside him, as Ludwig forced him to take Feliciano and go with the soldiers to a hospital. As Ludwig watched Feliciano go, beyond

any fear he had ever imagined, beyond any pain he had thought possible, beyond any hope he dared bring himself to believe.

Every time the circle of memory replayed, Ludwig's mind told him the same thing. No one could survive that. He knew no one could survive that. So why did he refuse to believe it? Maybe because some part of him knew that if he did, he would have nothing left. And he could not live with that. As it was, Ludwig lived for one thing - to know if Feliciano was alive. Yet he had no way to know, and no possible way to find out. And it was killing him. So every day, Ludwig did the only thing he could do. He went up, he did his job, and he tried to remember; tried to forget.

Ludwig walked slowly up the cement road: command buildings and the large, steel hangar on one side, the wide, open airfield on the other. This new base Ludwig had been assigned to was much further north than Feliciano's village, closer to the Austrian border. The Germans had lost too much ground in Italy, lost far too many bases in the northern area. With nowhere left to accommodate them, a small section of the airbase was serving as a temporary base for a small group of SS officers, and even occasionally members of the Gestapo. The very idea of it caused Ludwig's skin to crawl in disgust, uneasy at the proximity of such people. None of the pilots liked the arrangement; but then, as Ludwig was quickly coming to realise, their thoughts had never mattered anyway. Ludwig used to believe they were making a difference. Now he knew that all they were was puppets.

Ludwig pulled on his gloves forcefully, ignoring the occasional glances and whispers he received from other pilots and personnel as he passed. He was used to everyone here staring and speaking about him. He was the brilliant young lieutenant who had not only survived being shot down by the Americans, but had managed to escape them as well. He was the once strict, reliable, straight-laced flight leader who now ordered his squad into dangerous, impossible situations and yet still managed to come out successful. He was feared, respected, misunderstood – and Ludwig could not give a damn for any of it.

Ludwig continued to prepare mentally for the flight ahead, to get himself into the right space, to crave the white noise and red fury of combat. To try not to think, or to think of nothing; still with that photograph in his jacket and that flower in his pocket. He nearly did not notice as he almost walked into a group of pilots standing at an intersection of the road. They all stood silently, watching where a car sat at a short distance, several grey-uniformed SS members milling around it. Ludwig halted immediately. "What's going on here?" he barked at the assembled pilots. "Do you men have nothing better to do than stand around spying on the Secret Police?"

The pilots looked at him guiltily, but one, another lieutenant, spoke up. "They've brought a prisoner in. A pilot."

Ludwig narrowed his eyes. "A pilot? But why…" He trailed off when the door of the car opened and a man in an American air combat uniform was hauled from the back seat. He was barely able to walk, supported under each arm by an SS officer. The front of his jacket was burned black, his hair looked matted with blood. He had no strength to resist the violent grip on his arms. Ludwig remembered the almost courteous way he had been brought into the

American base, and nearly choked on a wave of anger and disgust. The lieutenant's voice beside Ludwig broke him from his angry haze.

"That's the Magician they're bringing in." The small group of pilots stared silently in dismay and awed respect. "Looks like he couldn't disappear this time."

The American pilot raised his head slightly and Ludwig bit back a gasp of shock. The man beside him was correct – this was the Magician. The American pilot who had shot Ludwig down, the one who had chatted to him cheerfully; who had treated him with a strange, arrogant sort of civility, who had placed the photograph of Feliciano in Ludwig's pocket. Lieutenant Alfred Jones. He looked almost dead. Ludwig shook his head at the bitter irony, at this horrible twist of fate. "When was he brought down?" asked Ludwig. "Why did we not know about it?"

"Squadron up north apparently, right on the border. SS says he took down seven of them."

Ludwig glanced at the man in stunned disbelief. He couldn't have heard that correctly. It was impossible... "Seven?"

The lieutenant nodded. "That's why we haven't heard about it, I imagine. The SS have been interrogating him. Haven't gotten anywhere. So now the Gestapo are going to have a go."

Ludwig felt sick and confused. "For God's sake why, he is just an American pilot… we shoot them down every day!"

"Didn't you hear? They say he's been collaborating with the Italian resistance." The lieutenant shook his head and spat on the ground. "Who knows how these bastards get their information."

Ludwig felt his blood and muscles freeze in shock. His mind flashed briefly back to those words of Feliciano's… *Someone gave me information, but it doesn't matter*... In the frantic rush of that late night getaway, in the incredible, breathtaking bliss of just being again with Feliciano, in the panic and terror of those excruciating moments on the road, Ludwig had barely had the time to properly wonder just how Feliciano had managed to find out where he was. But now, Ludwig knew. It was Jones. It had to be him. Ludwig clenched his fists at the sight of the American lieutenant burnt, bleeding and broken. His nails dug into his flesh. "It's not right."

"Not for us to decide, is it?"

The officers dragged Jones off the road and into one of the long, grey buildings which had been designated for SS use. As they passed, Ludwig's gaze met Jones' briefly, but he wondered if those desperate eyes saw anything. This was the man who had told Feliciano where Ludwig was. This man was the reason Ludwig was free and standing here, watching him being dragged to interrogation and torture. Anger and grief and utter hopelessness all fell on Ludwig, pushing him down, turning everything he ever thought he knew of honour and duty and loyalty to ruin.

"Come on," said the Lieutenant beside him, the pilots slowly starting to drift away, their eyes cast downward. "We have a mission briefing."

Ludwig reluctantly walked away.

Another flight, another chance to forget. But there were no enemy aircraft today, and no aerial battle to lose himself in. With no way to release any of his anger and frustration, Ludwig lay staring at the dark ceiling in his tiny room at the base, unable to sleep. There were too many dark emotions thrumming under his skin, too many twisting thoughts racing through his brain. Ludwig never used to think like this, to feel like this. But factions seemed so blurred since he'd met Feliciano, and nothing was the way it was supposed to be anymore. Along with the ever-present thoughts and fears and images of Feliciano, now Ludwig also could not stop thinking of Lieutenant Jones. Of his wide, panicked, unseeing eyes, of his battered body hauled into an interrogation building. Ludwig did not like to think of it, but he knew what happened in that building. He knew the Gestapo did not represent the true soul of his country; he also knew what they did in the name of it. And Alfred Jones was a good man. He did not deserve what was happening to him. Ludwig tossed in his narrow bed, uncomfortable with the thoughts crowding his mind, and tried to tell himself – there were millions of good men who did not deserve what was happening to them every day in this war. That was what war was. Ludwig tried to justify it, but he couldn't. Because this was one situation he could do something about. And if Feliciano could be that brave for him – then Ludwig could do something brave and right as well. All traces of fatigue and sleep fell from him, and Ludwig pushed himself from the bed, awake and thrumming and determined. And he came to a decision.

These buildings were not designed for Gestapo use. There were no impossible collection of locks on the doors, no hidden rooms behind innocent walls. There was simply a long, brightly lit corridor, doors leading to windowed rooms, indifferent staff whose eyes glossed over the tall, large blond in the grey police jacket who marched through the nearly empty hall. Ludwig kept his eyes forward, his shoulders straight. If there was one thing he had learnt from years in the military, it was that if you looked like you belonged somewhere, few people asked questions. His pulse beat steadily, his focus sharp and unwavering. He felt like he did in the middle of a flight – ready, determined, and prepared. Fear did not enter the equation.

Ludwig took a sharp turn into another corridor, and his stomach immediately jumped. The lights ended halfway down the hall, leaving the far end covered in shadow. It was entirely empty, entirely silent. Ludwig took a deep, steadying breath and marched briskly down the hall. His mind could barely acknowledge what he was doing. Pilots were not allowed in this section of the base. He had no idea how he would explain himself if he was caught. He had no idea how to even explain it to himself. Just what was he doing, trying to find this American pilot? Just what did he think he could do in the end? And why did it suddenly matter so damn much?

Ludwig reached the last door on the right, the only one with a folder attached to the front and a small, makeshift lock above the door handle. Ludwig turned and looked again down the hall, his eyes sweeping through every shadow and his ears tuned for the smallest echo. There was nothing. He raised an eyebrow, finding himself strangely put out by his military's lack of

security. Yes, it was the early hours of the morning, but it should not be this easy to make his way to an important prisoner's room unimpeded. Ludwig turned back and studied the door closely in the dim light that filtered down the hall. Since these rooms were never designed to be prisons, proper locks had not been fitted. And this bolt on the door looked far too flimsy to be effective. Ludwig simply grasped the handle, pulled to steady it, then slammed his arm down on the lock. It ripped from the door, and Ludwig dropped it disdainfully to the ground before entering the room.

It felt colder in the small, white room. A cold, sterilised smell pervaded the air, mixed with a hint of blood. Only one high window lent a small amount of light to the place, showing it empty but for a table in the centre and an iron bed against the far wall. And there, unnervingly still and white in the moonlight, lay Lieutenant Alfred Jones. Ludwig hurried over to his side with a mixture of relief and horror in his gut. Jones' eyes were closed, his breathing low and shallow. Ludwig could not tell if he was asleep.

"Lieutenant Jones."

Jones did not open his eyes. He answered in a slow, broken monotone. "Name, Alfred Jones. Rank, Lieutenant. Serial number, 501/7." His voice was low and hoarse.

Of course… the only three things required to be said in military law. Ludwig had employed the same tactic when he had been captured. The Americans had tried to get more from him, had kept him awake for hours asking questions. But they had never tried anything like this. "Jones, I need you to tell me something."

Jones' breath came faster and his hands clenched. "Name, Alfred Jones. Rank, Lieutenant. Serial number, 501/7." He obviously thought he was still being interrogated.

"No, listen, I…"

Jones' voice rose louder. "Name, Alfred Jones. Rank…"

"Damn it, listen to me, I am not an interrogator. My name is Lieutenant Beilschmidt." Jones did not answer. "Ludwig," Ludwig explained. "Ludwig Beilschmidt."

Jones' eyes shot open. They were a sickening shade of red and darted frantically before settling on Ludwig's. "Ludwig… the German pilot… Feliciano…"

Ludwig nodded in relief. So it was as he had thought. Jones had spoken with Feliciano. "Yes."

"What are you doing here? You escaped? How?" Jones spoke slowly, his words slurred.

"I was hoping you could tell me. Are you the one who told Feliciano where I was being held? Because if you did, I am here because of you."

Jones made a croaky gasp which might have been a laugh. "I see. Forgive me if I don't celebrate your release." It seemed to be increasingly difficult for Jones to form the words. "My regard for German servicemen has been somewhat damaged lately." He suddenly gasped

and clutched at his shoulder, his face twisted in pain. He was in terrible shape, yet as bad as it looked, it seemed the Gestapo had not yet got to him. If they had, he would be far worse than this. Jones' entire manner was slow and groggy. Ludwig had heard of the drugs the SS used to extract confessions from prisoners, and wondered just how much of this conversation Jones would remember.

"I am sorry," said Ludwig softly, honestly. "I just want you to know that… that…"

"Yeah?"

To know what? What could Ludwig do now? At the sight of Alfred Jones lying in drugged agony from the hands of Ludwig's own military, he knew immediately. He could not leave this man here much longer. "I am going to repay the debt I owe you."

Jones glared at him with blood-red eyes. "We'll see… about that." He dissolved into a coughing fit and turned away. Ludwig nodded and walked out the door, passing a lower ranked SS member on his way down the corridor. He snapped at the man loudly.

"The last door on the right. Fix the damn lock."

Once the decision was made, it became surprisingly easy to follow through. For the first time in his life, Ludwig was doing something because he thought it was right, not because it was what he was told. For the first time, he was ignoring his duty, and breaking the rules. Damn the rules. Damn it all. His superiors, his leaders… what did he owe any of them? Which of them had ever done more for him than this unknown American? Ludwig was reminded of the words Feliciano had asked him so simply, so innocently, on that long ago winter afternoon they had walked together to the village market. *Is that why you do it? Because it is your duty?* When Ludwig had been so sure it was not his place to question his country's reasons; when Feliciano had told him so easily that it was.

Ludwig sat at the outdoor café in the little border village, waiting for the contact he had been assigned. Whether this was to betray his country or redeem himself, he did not know. It had taken him two days and endless broken, suspicious conversations with villagers to track down someone who knew something of the Resistenza, and a further day to convince them to allow Ludwig to meet with one of them. Ludwig was unarmed and dressed in civilian clothes. To the busy throng of Italians who passed by on the sunny street, he could have been anyone. Watching them pass, Ludwig again could not stop the memories of Feliciano flooding his heart and mind. How charmingly innocent he had looked sitting at a street table just like this as an SS execution squad approached the town square; how afraid and horrified he had looked as he realised what was happening. How desperate Ludwig had been to get him away from that, to protect him from having to see something like that. How his lovely face had lit up as Ludwig brought up their language lesson, trying to take his mind off the ugly events that had just occurred. Ludwig put his head in his hands briefly, overcome by this familiar, desperate, unbearable ache for Feliciano. Feliciano, who was too innocent, too pure, too sweet and honest and beautiful for any of this. Feliciano never deserved any of this.

Rubbing his face with his hands, Ludwig looked up to see a broad, dark haired man push through the busy café crowd, his eyes fixed on Ludwig. Ludwig's entire body jolted to a rigid

halt. His eyes froze, wide and unblinking; his very lungs seemed to steal the breath from him and turn it cold. He could not remove his hands from his face, could not make himself stand, could do nothing but watch as the man marched through the parting crowd to stand directly over him. The man stared down with hard, dark eyes, with a disapproving, hostile expression. For the first time in weeks, Ludwig felt a flash of fear. He knew immediately who this was. The same hair, the same eyes. A bigger, older, sterner version of Feliciano. This was Feliciano's grandfather. Ludwig finally swallowed heavily and forced himself to his feet, completely numb to the sensation of it. When he eventually managed to speak, he stumbled over the words. "Signor Vargas."

"Lieutenant Beilschmidt."

They just stared at each other, silently, neither making a move to back down or look away. In the heavy silence, Ludwig realised – this man knew who he was. Knew what he was to Feliciano. This man knew everything. Finally Vargas broke the silence, speaking in English. "You are taking a very big risk coming here, German."

"So are you."

Vargas did not respond to that. "I have been informed you have information for..."

"Please," interrupted Ludwig, unable to wait anymore, unable to stand it. This was more than he had dared to hope. This was the chance he had prayed for, begged for. This was finally his opportunity, after weeks of ignorance and hell, to know the only thing he had ever really needed to know. "Feliciano. Please tell me he is alive."

Vargas raised an eyebrow dangerously. "If that is all I am here for, German, if you have lied about having something of vital importance for us only to be able to ask…"

"I have not lied." Ludwig barely noticed or cared that he was interrupting. He had never needed anything in his life like he needed to know, right now, if he had anything left to live for. "I swear, I have your information. I am simply asking to know one small thing in return. I need..." Ludwig broke off shakily and ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm his ragged nerves. "Please, signore, I need to know."

Vargas took a deep breath, pondering the request. "Perhaps we should take a seat to discuss this, Lieutenant."

Ludwig nodded, sitting so fast he nearly knocked the chair over. He gritted his teeth and told himself to get it together. Vargas sat carefully in the seat opposite him, not tearing his eyes from Ludwig's the entire time.

"You have been asking questions in town, Lieutenant. Questions that an officer of the Luftwaffe should not be asking. You are very, very lucky that information of this came to me, and not to others who might be dangerously suspicious of what a German officer is doing asking after the Italian resistance." Vargas sounded like Feliciano, but deeper; his eyes were Feliciano's, but slightly darker. And he knew. He knew if Feliciano was alive. But this was a man of battle, and he was going to make Ludwig fight for the information. Ludwig drew

himself up in his chair, squared his shoulders and raised his chin. He would show this Italian how he could fight.

"And you are giving your name, showing your face to a German officer in close contact with the Secret Police. I believe we could both be in a dangerous situation here, signore." Ludwig glared evenly.

Vargas' eyes flashed, but the corner of his mouth actually rose slightly. "Well said, German. Although I doubt very much you went to all this trouble just to put an old man in the hands of the SS."

"Not just any old man. From what I have heard of you, Roma Vargas, you are an enemy to be feared." Ludwig knew immediately this was the right thing to say. Vargas looked quite pleased.

"All right, German. Give me this information of yours, and we will see where we go from there."

Ludwig nodded and leant forward slightly. "There is an American pilot at our base. He is being interrogated."

Vargas furrowed his brows. "Interrogated at an air base?"

"Due to certain circumstances, we are being forced to share our base with those we would prefer to distance ourselves from. When I say I am in close contact with the Secret Police, signore, I mean it quite literally."

Vargas' features twisted in disgust. "I see. So the SS interrogates shot down American pilots now?"

"This one is different. They believe he has information about the Resistenza."

Vargas again looked confused. "How could he possibly..."

Ludwig interrupted quickly. "His name is Lieutenant Alfred Jones."

Vargas broke off and sat back silently. He shifted nervously, rubbing a hand across his chin. He appeared to be thinking, then just shook his head, his expression puzzled. "Lieutenant Jones… yes, I remember. But no, there was nothing we said… no, this is ridiculous, we simply drank with him. What can they possibly think he knows?"

"Is it not enough that he knows where to find your faction of the resistance?"

Ludwig could see Vargas understand. The man almost turned white, but then shook his head again stubbornly. "But our village is no longer occupied by the Germans. There is no way they can reach us there."

"Signore, it is now the primary focus of both the SS and the Gestapo to root out factions of the Resistenza in this country. To think they can not reach you because your village is close to an American base is nothing but willful ignorance."

Vargas ran his hand over his forehead, looked away then down, breathed out heavily. "He is an honourable man. He will not..."

"Talk? Signore, honourable or not, after several days with the Gestapo, he will be screaming every single thing they ask and more. The SS have had him for days now, and I believe he has said nothing. But he is badly injured from the crash. Once the Gestapo get to him…" Ludwig broke off. "I have seen him. It will not be long before he breaks. I know what the Resistenza does. I know you can get allied combatants out of this country. You can get him to London, to a hospital."

Vargas leant back in his chair and gazed across at Ludwig intently. Ludwig started to feel uncomfortable, the silence between them filled with the noisy and oblivious chatter of the crowd around them. "I know you want to know about my grandson, German," said Vargas finally, the words shooting through Ludwig's nerves and veins. "But that's not all this is, is it? After all, you had no way of knowing it would be I who would meet you today. So, tell me. Why are you telling me this? Why are you going to such lengths to try and hand this American over to us?"

Ludwig returned Vargas' intense stare. It was as though the Italian was trying to break Ludwig down with his eyes. It would not work. "I believe in repaying my debts," said Ludwig evenly. "I owe this man."

"What can you possibly owe an American pilot?" As soon as the words left his mouth, Vargas' eyes flashed and his lips twisted. A sudden rush of understanding lit his face. "He is the one who told Feliciano where you were being held." Ludwig just nodded. "Yes. The afternoon he came to the cantina, he spoke to Feliciano… he must have known, somehow…"

"He shot me down," Ludwig explained. There was no point hiding any part of this strange, incredible story now. "Lieutenant Jones shot me down, captured me, and saw a photograph I had of Feliciano. That is how he knew we were…" Ludwig stopped and wondered how to phrase this. "…how he knew Feliciano and I knew each other. And how he knew where I was being held."

"So he is responsible for what happened too." Ludwig could see Vargas growing angry. "So why would I..."

"Signore, you must understand. He knows who you are. He knows your names. You, Lovino. Feliciano." Ludwig shrugged and spread his hands. "He knows where you live. And I do not know what else you spoke of with him, but…"

Vargas closed his eyes, his forehead furrowing painfully. "He can not stay in the hands of the Gestapo."

Ludwig almost sighed in relief. "No."

Vargas opened his eyes and fixed Ludwig with a piercing stare. He spoke simply and steadily. "I detest traitors." Ludwig's stomach churned at the word. If there was one thing he could always rely on, one thing he would live and die for, it was his loyalty to his country. To be considered a traitor was worse than death. And yet –

"I used to see everything in black and white as well." Ludwig felt the smallest smile on his lips, unable to stop it. "Then I met Feliciano."

Vargas placed his hands on the table. The sound of the world outside them faded, the sunny light seemed to darken, and Vargas tilted his head just slightly as those dark eyes so like Feliciano's bore into Ludwig's soul. "You love my grandson, don't you, German."

Ludwig responded with every ounce of certainty in his possession. "Signore. I used to live and breathe for my country. Now, I do it for him."

Vargas stared for a moment more before standing. Ludwig followed, a little surprised at this sudden termination. Vargas reached into his jacket then handed Ludwig an envelope. "We will meet you at these coordinates, tomorrow night, at exactly 0200 hours. Bring this American pilot. And pray he has not been made to talk." Vargas turned to leave. He was leaving; leaving, and Ludwig had not been told; leaving, and Ludwig still did not know…

"Wait, no!" Ludwig cried out before he even thought of saying the words. "Signore, please."

Vargas stopped, his hands clenched, his shoulders rigid. He did not turn. "He is alive." The world turned briefly black as Ludwig's blood rushed through his head. He felt his knees weaken and had to grasp onto the back of a chair to stay standing. "He was unconscious for days. He called your name the entire time. But he is alive, and doing well, and should make a complete recovery."

Ludwig's chest lightened, soared, and he actually laughed briefly, almost unable to bear the exhaling sensation of relief. Feliciano was alive. Life had meaning again; the world had purpose. Now everything would be all right. Ludwig put a hand to his mouth, had to restrain himself from crying out or falling down or breaking into ridiculous hysterics. He just breathed calmly and nodded, his eyes focused firmly on the ground to control the rising tears of release. "Thank you."

"Ludwig." Ludwig blinked in surprise at the use of his name, then looked up to see that Vargas was staring back at him, his expression stern, yet his eyes somehow sad. "Even when this war ends, you do realise. There is no way for you and Feliciano to be together."

Ludwig dropped his hand and clenched his fingers around the envelope, then drew himself to his full height and turned away. He refused to even acknowledge Vargas' words. "Tomorrow night, Signor Vargas."

This time, Ludwig brought two stolen SS jackets with him. He marched again down the central corridor of the SS building, turned into the side hall, and made his way to the same room he had broken into a few nights earlier. He did not stop, did not think. The building was again almost empty in the silence of midnight. When he reached the door, Ludwig slammed the new lock, again breaking it easily, and threw open the door. The smell of blood struck him violently. "Jones." Ludwig rushed over to the bed, and immediately recoiled in sickening dismay.

Jones was not good – not good at all. The pale moonlight through the window illuminated the red stained sheets, Jones' face paper white but for the deep, black bruises beneath his eyes and the drops of blood that beaded his hairline. His bare chest was covered in fresh scars, the skin red and raised and bloody where it had obviously been recently gouged. It barely rose with his shallow, irregular breaths.

"Jones," whispered Ludwig again, softly, trying to keep his voice steady. There was no response. "Lieutenant. Alfred."

"I told you," Jones replied finally, whispering the words under his breath. "I don't… told you… don't know what you want…" Ludwig closed his eyes briefly and sighed. He had not been fast enough. Jones must have finally been interrogated by the Gestapo. The hand that lay on his stomach was missing two fingers and covered in a bloody bandage. Ludwig's stomach churned. He had heard stories that the Gestapo kept fingers as trophies. He had never wanted to believe it. Ludwig reached out and hesitantly touched Jones' shoulder.

"Jones…" He was interrupted as Jones suddenly thrashed and screamed.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Ludwig jolted, then grasped Jones' shoulders to restrain him, but that just brought another scream from Jones' lips. Ludwig immediately snatched his hands back. Of course, where Jones' jacket had been burnt through… he must have been burned in the crash. The skin was completely burnt away, bloody across his shoulder and down across his chest. Ludwig wondered how he had survived so long with such a wound and no proper treatment.

"I am sorry, but please, you must be quiet. You are coming with me."

Jones' eyes were wild and blood red as they darted frantically. He could obviously barely see anything. "Name, Alfred Jones. Rank… I mean… name, Alfred…"

Ludwig looked anxiously towards the door, worried that Jones' harsh shouting would be easily heard down the hall. "No, ssh, Alfred, it's me. Lieutenant Beil - Ludwig. Feliciano's friend. I am getting you out of here."

Jones started to calm, his breath still fast and frenzied. Sweat mixed with the blood in his hair and ran in red rivulets down his pale face. "Ludwig?" He sounded half insensible.

"Yes," said Ludwig. He grasped Jones' arm and pulled him upright on the bed. "Listen. I know you are in pain. But you have to stay quiet. I'm going to put this jacket on you. I am sorry, it is going to hurt." Ludwig threw the SS jacket over Jones' shoulders, and Jones winced and bit back a shaky hiss. Ludwig did not pause, just pulled Jones to his feet and dragged him insistently towards the door. Jones slumped immediately in his arms. "I am sorry," said Ludwig again, forcing Jones to stand. "Once we are out of the base I will carry you. But you must force yourself to walk out of this building." Jones nodded, and Ludwig could see that he was bewildered. But they had no time for explanations, no time to talk through this. They just had to get out. Ludwig knew the SS jackets would probably do nothing if they were seen, and he knew he had no plan for what he was doing. Standing in the door to the corridor, Ludwig took a deep breath and felt himself fall into the determined and accepting headspace he knew so well from hours of aerial combat. "Are you a religious man, Jones?" he asked impulsively.

"Don't know anymore," Jones mumbled in reply. Ludwig nodded.

"Well, I'm going to go ahead and pray for both of us. Keep moving."

Ludwig had no reason to believe they would not be caught. But all he could do was trust to chance, let go of his control, and half carry, half drag Jones out of the SS building. They passed no one on their way through the corridors. Ludwig kicked open the locked back door and dragged Jones insistently from the building, through the dark, silent shadows of the sleeping base, past empty trucks and poorly manned fences. Jones' breathed heavily as he leant against Ludwig, occasionally gasping or hissing in pain. Ludwig tried to hold him as upright as possible. He avoided the main entrance, instead leading Jones to the east side of the base, cutting through another unarmed fence and out onto the wide, country road.

Once outside the base, Ludwig lifted Jones onto his back, taking care to put the pressure on his unburnt side, and set off immediately down the long road. "Good work, Jones," he said breathlessly, wiping the sweat from his brow, feeling his blood thrum vibrantly beneath his skin, shoot tingling down his spine.

"German bases… terrible security… no wonder we're winning the war."

Ludwig could not be sure he had understood that correctly, though he felt massively reassured to hear it. "I could say the same about yours, you know." Ludwig did not bother to marvel at how they had made it out unhindered. Right now, he was at the stage of just taking everything as it came, and there was no need to fear, and no need to worry, because the only thing he could control was how far he could walk with this man on his back. There was perhaps a two hour walk ahead, depending how fast Ludwig could keep his speed up. Jones' head rested on Ludwig's shoulder, his arms clasped in Ludwig's hands. Ludwig took care not to apply too much pressure so close to the open wounds of Jones' mutilated fingers. "Nearly there, Jones. I'm taking you to the Italian resistance. They'll get you out of here. You're going home."

"Home," said Jones quietly. "Arthur…" He sighed softly, sounded like he was drifting. Ludwig knew he had to keep the American awake until he got to proper medical care. If he passed out with those injuries, there was too great a chance he would not wake up again.

"Who is Arthur?"

"Arthur is everything."

Ludwig raised an eyebrow. Well, who'd have thought. He had something in common with this American after all. "Tell me about Arthur."

"He can't play baseball. And he swears too much. And drinks too much. But he's perfect… and he doesn't know it…" Jones again started to drift, his words coming slower and softer.

"And?" Ludwig prompted. "Jones? What does Arthur look like?"

Jones coughed faintly. He was shaking, and his skin was so hot to Ludwig's touch. "His eyes are green. Like… like something green."

"Like fresh grass," Ludwig supplied. "Or wide fields in winter. Or the leaves of an oak tree."

"Or sapphires."

"Sapphires are blue."

"Oh."

"Emeralds are green, though. As green as emeralds."

"Yes," said Jones faintly, his voice fading again. "Emeralds with bloody big eyebrows."

Ludwig shook him slightly. "And what else?"

Jones sighed again. "And I love him."

"So just stay awake, Jones, and soon you will see him." The night was warm around them, the weather quickly warming up to summer. The bright moon overhead shone soft light onto the close trees on either side of the deserted road, and Ludwig felt strangely calm and peaceful walking down this tranquil Italian country road with an enemy on his back.

"Ludwig."

"Yes?"

"You are a good man."

"So are you, Alfred." Silence. "Alfred, stay awake. Tell me…" Ludwig felt at a bit of a loss suddenly. How was one supposed to speak to an American? "Tell me about something you like."

"I like Arthur."

"Yes, I gathered that. Anything else?"

"I like frogs."

Ludwig paused a moment. Of all things… "Frogs. Really?" Jones was probably still half delirious.

"Yes."

"Hmm." Very well, frogs, Ludwig could talk about frogs if he damn well had to. "Do you know that there is a species of frog in Africa that grows to over thirty centimetres long and weighs over four kilograms?"

"How the hell big is that?

Ludwig snorted. Americans and their outdated measuring systems. "Fifteen inches, nine pounds." There was another silence and Ludwig started to worry Jones had lost consciousness. "Alfred?"

"That is one big fucking frog.'

Ludwig almost laughed. "And do you know, there is a small frog, in South America I believe, whose skin is covered in enough poison to kill two thousand people, can you imagine…" Ludwig stopped abruptly. Oh Lord, he was starting to talk like Feliciano.

"Huh. Hey, instead of bombs, we could fill our B-17s with those frogs and drop them over Berlin." Jones let out a small snort. "Shit, sorry."

All right, time to change the subject. What else did Americans speak about… sport, probably. "So, Arthur can not play baseball. Are you a fan of baseball?"

"More sense than cricket. You ever played cricket?"

"No. I always preferred soccer."

"Soccer, huh. Soccer's just baseball without the bat."

This time Ludwig actually did laugh, to his deep surprise. "I don't think so, somehow."

Ludwig continued to try and keep Jones awake. There were short periods of silence, but then Ludwig would fear Jones had fallen asleep and he would again start prodding him with questions. Ludwig had not spoken so much since Feliciano. Jones was obviously in incredible pain, with a high fever, yet Ludwig was impressed at his composure and coherence in such a situation. He found himself wondering vaguely whether or not they might have been friends in other, kinder circumstances. The hours passed peacefully, and just when they were nearing the contact point, Ludwig could not stop himself from asking.

"Jones." Silence. "Alfred."

"Hmm?"

"You spoke with Feliciano."

"Yeah."

The dark sky was bright with a thousand stars, the little country road silent in the still, early hours – just like that last night with Feliciano. But now Ludwig knew Feliciano was alive. Whatever happened to Ludwig himself, he could accept it, because Feliciano was all right. "And… and what did you speak of? With Feliciano?"

Alfred laughed shortly, weakly, just a slight exhalation of breath. "So happy, so friendly. He gave me an apple." Alfred was drifting again, Ludwig could hear it. "Funny boy, really. Only not a boy. He's my age. I was surprised…"

"It seems like that, at first. But he's so much smarter than you think. He is just honest, and simple, which is not the same as stupid. He does not get caught in all these stupid ideas, in the politics of a world where hate controls so many lives..." Ludwig broke off, tried to think of a way to describe Feliciano's beautiful outlook on life. Then he remembered and laughed

suddenly, an unstoppable burst of light in the darkness. "Alfred, wouldn't it be wonderful if instead of all this fighting we could just play soccer?"

"Yeah," agreed Alfred weakly. "Or baseball. Just…"

"…Just not cricket," Ludwig finished.

A pool of light appeared in the short distance and Ludwig sped up towards it, sweat falling from his brow, his back and legs starting to feel the effects of carrying a full grown man on his back for hours. The light came from a dark truck, and as Ludwig drew closer he could make out men standing beside it. "We're nearly there, Alfred," he said firmly. "Nearly there."

Lovino shot Ludwig a dark glare as they approached, but then nodded slightly and helped take Alfred from Ludwig's back. He helped the half conscious American into the back of the truck as Signor Vargas stood before Ludwig with an expression both surprised and impressed. "Thank you, Lieutenant. You have done a good thing tonight."

Ludwig nodded, breathless, the entire mad evening finally falling into place around him. He was not quite sure what he had done, or what the consequences would be. But he could only think of one thing to ask. "Feliciano. Tell me, please. How is Feliciano?"

As soon as he said the words, as soon as Vargas opened his mouth to answer, the deep, rumbling roar of a car engine came from the road behind them. Vargas' face turned white in the truck headlights, and sudden, impulsive response shot like a bullet through Ludwig's veins. "Go!" he shouted, backing away as Vargas' eyes shot between him and the distant, approaching headlights. "For God's sake, go!"

Vargas looked at Ludwig for a second more, his eyes narrow, almost appraising him, his chin raised in a strange, approving sort of gesture. But then Lovino's voice shouted from the truck - "*Nonno!*" - and Vargas was shaken from his split second reverie. He raced for the driver's seat, shouting as he went.

"Feliciano is doing well, German. You'd better survive for him. Or I will kill you."

Ludwig did not have time to ponder the strange words, just watching as the truck took off down the road, as the shiny, black car approached from behind. It screeched to a stop beside him, grey suited officers jumping immediately from the back seat, handcuffs already in hand. And then it hit him – just what he had done. Ludwig had betrayed his country. He felt the world turn slow and cloudy around him, watched the SS officers glide towards him in slow motion, watched his eyelashes move as he blinked. There was no fear, because fear had long ago given way to more painful emotions. There was no anger, because his limited anger had drained away. There was only acceptance, because right now there was nothing he could do, and he had no way to control this. Cold metal encircled his wrists and Ludwig heard his breath flow in his ears, watched his slow eyelashes blink before him. He tilted back his head and gazed at the clear, endless stars in the black sky overhead. He only ever wanted to do his duty. Only wanted to fight for his country. How had it come to this? And how could he not bring himself to regret it?

"Lieutenant Ludwig Beilschmidt. You are under arrest for treason."

To be continued...

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring passed in a haze of pain and confusion. White sheets, cold hands, cool cloth that turned warm on burning skin. Faces drifting in his dim, cloudy vision - Lovino, Grandpa, strange people he did not know. Water that tasted of metal, food he could not swallow. Someone praying; someone crying. The clean, warm scent of flowers and herbs from the garden. And always the dreams. Dreams of Ludwig, of oak trees and fireplaces, of winter afternoons that Feliciano could not be sure were real. But now, he could not be sure if anything was real.

When Feliciano woke, summer had already begun. With the Germans gone from the village, Grandpa and Lovino worked again in the fields. Feliciano spent the days sitting in the garden, sometimes reading, sometimes remembering. Occasionally Antonio joined him. Feliciano was grateful for the company, but Antonio coughed so much it made conversation difficult. Usually they just watched the sky silently for hours, but Antonio always looked like he was in pain. Very rarely, if it did not hurt too much, Lovino would help Feliciano walk to the oak tree. But when Feliciano spoke of Ludwig, Lovino just looked away.

Feliciano did not remember the hospital. Did not remember the bullet being dug from his skin. Did not remember being brought home, barely conscious. All Feliciano remembered was seeing Ludwig's face, feeling his arms, hearing his voice as that piercing pain tore through Feliciano's body. All he knew was that Ludwig was gone. All he attempted, day after day, was to suppress his anguish, and ignore his fear. It was not until autumn that Grandpa Roma sat Feliciano down in the kitchen and tried to explain.

"Feliciano. I want you to listen to me, and I want you to be brave, okay?"

Feliciano's gaze drifted away from Roma's sad, concerned eyes. He listened to the clock ticking like thunder in the silent room and watched the autumn leaves float leisurely into the garden outside the window. "I don't think I want to hear, Grandpa."

Feliciano did not resist when Roma reached out and took his hand across the warm, wooden table. "Please, Feli. I've waited too long to tell you this. You've waited too long to hear." Feliciano did not respond, but neither did he tear his eyes from the dancing leaves outside. "Feliciano… do you remember Alfred? Your American friend, the pilot?"

"Yes." Feliciano ignored the ache in his chest, the irregular pounding of his pulse. He did not want to feel. He had tried for months not to feel. Feliciano was so sick and tired of feeling.

"You do know how Lovino and I were able to rescue him, don't you?"

"L… Lud…" Feliciano squeezed his eyes shut. He could not say the name. If he said the name, it would be too real, and it would hurt too much. "He told you."

"Yes," said Roma quietly. "I thought you might know."

Of course he knew. Although Roma and Lovino had stayed mostly silent, it was not hard for Feliciano to put the pieces together. True, he did not know everything. But from what he had been told, what he had overheard, and what he had determined himself, Feliciano knew enough. How Alfred had been shot down and captured. How Ludwig had told Roma about Alfred's position and arranged an escape. How Roma and Lovino had picked up the American pilot and taken him to an American base. How neither his grandpa nor his brother would tell Feliciano any more than that.

Roma spoke softly, as though afraid to break the silence, or something else. "Feli. The night Ludwig brought Alfred to us… just after he handed Alfred over…" Roma took a deep breath and delivered the next words evenly. "Feli, what Ludwig did was very noble, and very brave. It was also against military law. That night, Ludwig was arrested by the Gestapo."

The words tore into Feliciano's heart like another bullet. He could not longer contain the feelings, fears, and suspicions he had tried to suppress for months. Once again he couldn't breathe, his skin turned cold, the room spun like the falling leaves outside, and all Feliciano could think was… "Gestapo… the Gestapo had Antonio… oh God…"

Roma interrupted, loud and firm. "No, Feli, listen to me. They did not do that to him."

Feliciano gulped back his tears, blinked at Roma pleadingly. He gritted his teeth and shook his head. *Don't say… don't say…* "No."

Roma squeezed Feliciano's hand. "They did not kill him either. Ludwig was very well known in Germany. The German military would not execute one of their most celebrated pilots at such a crucial time – the damage to morale would be too drastic."

Feliciano had to stop to breathe. He placed a hand to where the bullet had torn through his skin. This cold panic was exhausting, and the old pain in his chest was building and sharpening. "Then what?" he asked hesitantly. He did not want to know, but he needed to know, and all Feliciano could think was that he was about to finally have his heart shattered beyond repair. "What happened to Lud- to Ludwig?"

Roma breathed out audibly. "All we know is that he was sent to the Russian Front. He was probably put into a punitive unit."

Feliciano did not understand. "A what?"

"It is like a military prison. Combat units made up of criminals and traitors. They are given mission considered too dangerous for the regular military, and…" Roma broke off and sighed. Feliciano waited for him to continue. "And no one survives for long."

The room darkened – a cloud must have drifted across the sun. Feliciano sat silently, wondering why he wasn't screaming, wondering why he wasn't falling to the floor. Strangely, he simply felt numb. "Oh." Feliciano looked again out the window, waiting for the sky to brighten again. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were sick, Feli. I was already so afraid you would not survive. I'm sorry."

Feliciano nodded. "But you don't know. You don't know for sure that he is dead."

"No. But… oh Feli, I'm so sorry, but... but it would be best for you to forget him."

Feliciano was stunned by the words. He couldn't even be sure he had heard them correctly. He snapped his head back and stared at Roma incredulously. "Forget him?"

Roma looked almost guilty. "I can't stand to see you like this forever. You used to laugh and sing." Roma blinked heavily and looked at the table. "You used to smile." He shook his head as though to clear it, and stared again at Feliciano intently. "Ludwig is not coming back, Feliciano. Forgetting him is..." Roma shrugged. "It's all you can do."

Feliciano could not believe it. He actually laughed. Forget Ludwig - he'd never heard a more impossible suggestion. He looked Roma in the eyes. "What if I told you to just forget Grandma. To forget Mama. Would you be able to do that?"

Roma closed his eyes painfully. "Feli…"

Feliciano blinked, then felt his gaze drift once more. Was this really it? Was this the last he would ever hear of the person who meant more to Feliciano than anyone or anything he had ever known? It was too calm. It was too quiet. There should be an earthquake; the sky should be falling. Why was he still not screaming? Why was the world not ending? "So I'll never know." Feliciano barely realised he spoke the words aloud. "Never know if he died quickly. If he was in pain, if he was alone. I'll never know if it was a bullet or the cold or…"

"Stop it, Feliciano!" Roma's commanding words were a startling intrusion in Feliciano's thoughts. "You can't think like that, you can't, it will drive you insane!"

Feliciano let out a short, sharp breath. He had to shake away the terrifying image of Ludwig falling, lifeless, in the Russian snow. He tried again, desperately, not to think; not to feel. "I don't want to hear anymore, Grandpa." Feliciano realised his hand was still in Roma's, and snatched it back. "I just want to go away."

And again the winter. A year since Feliciano had met a German officer on a country road and the world had changed; a year since Feliciano found the one real thing in life that mattered. Feliciano barely noticed the season passing and turning again to spring. Barely realised that the war continued, fought in other countries now, other villages. Barely cared when the news came of Germany's surrender, and a few months later of Japan's also. The days drifted past, empty; the months stretched on, barren. Feliciano did not even notice when the war ended.

Autumn, 1947

Feliciano grew accustomed to a certain kind of numbness. It was the only way he could make it through, day to day. He did not always consciously remember Ludwig these days. Instead he was like a constant shadow, a presence that was always there, always with Feliciano,

beside him and inside him. Almost four years had passed since Feliciano last saw Ludwig. The Resistenza was broken, grown into a political movement Grandpa Roma wanted nothing to do with. Now Roma worked in the fields. Feliciano helped with what he could, but he still got short of breath sometimes, and the pain from the wound in his chest made it impossible to work for long. Lovino and Antonio had moved away, closer to the doctors in town. And while everything changed, still nothing changed. Feliciano did not know if he still had hope, or where it had gone; he did not know if he was waiting, or what he was waiting for. All he knew was that there was some part of him – some tiny, persistent, stubborn part of him – that refused to let Ludwig go.

So the days and months and years passed slowly, numbly. Most days were fine. Months could pass in some strange semblance of normality. But sometimes the old pain would overwhelm him. It could be the tiniest thing - the smell of rosemary, a red flower falling from a tree, the familiar strains of an old song. And then Feliciano would remember Ludwig's deep laugh, and the touch of his lips; the smell of his jacket and the blueness of his eyes. He would almost hear Ludwig's voice, almost feel Ludwig's big hand in his. And Feliciano would need him so much he would fall, or scream, or throw something, anything, against the wall. He would feel too much, the way he always used to, and the anguish would claw at his chest until he almost felt he wanted to die.

On days like these, all Feliciano could do was walk to the oak tree. He would watch the sky turn dark, feel the wind grow cold. And he would let himself remember. He tried to recall every word Ludwig had ever spoken to him. He sang *'Bella Ciao'* and *'Auf Wiedersehen, Sweetheart'* softly. He picked flowers and remembered Ludwig's big hands holding a little red daisy, Ludwig's voice telling him it was his lucky charm. He wondered if Ludwig still had the flower, or if Ludwig was holding it when he breathed his last. He ran through the grass and remembered how it felt to fall, laughing, beside the bluest eyes and kindest smile he had ever seen.

On days like these, Feliciano looked up over the hills, remembered walking with Ludwig and sitting on old church ruins. Remembered looking down at the cloud-covered landscape and the tiny town below, remembered plucking leaves from trees and taking photographs. He did not need the photograph of Ludwig anymore. Of course he kept it beside his heart, every day. But he did not need to look at it to see it, the image long since burnt into his heart and his memory. And yet sometimes, looking up at that hill he could no longer climb alone, Feliciano would take the little photograph from his pocket. He would run his fingers over the image of Ludwig's face, over the words on the back. *Auf wiedersehen, sweetheart.* And he would remember.

On days like these, Feliciano let his eyes wander in the direction of the old barn, and remembered the most breathtaking night of his life. Ludwig's bemusement at a fireplace in a barn, his wordless surprise at seeing Feliciano removing his clothes. Ludwig's gentle hands, his heated skin; his darkened eyes and rapid breath. Ludwig's heartbeat against Feliciano's ear, his big, safe arms that held Feliciano like they would never, ever let him go.

Today was one of those days. The sun was turning a burnt orange in the cloudless, midday sky as Feliciano sat in the familiar spot against the tree, the bark at his back almost polished smooth over the years. He twirled a leaf absently between his fingers, humming to himself,

feeling the peace that this place evoked settle over him slowly. This was Feliciano's somewhere else now. This was the centre of his memory, the respite of his soul, and the resting place of his heart.

The day drew on, slow and calm and easy, until the sky gradually started to darken. A swift gust of wind shook the brittle leaves from a nearby tree, sending them spiralling past Feliciano's eyes. At almost the same moment, the hair suddenly stood up on the back of his neck. A strange, wary tingle started in his shoulders. It took Feliciano only a few moments to realise that someone was watching him. A fearful shock ran through his head and down his spine, and he jumped immediately to his feet.

The man approached him slowly, elegant but purposeful. Feliciano pressed back into the tree, his pulse racing fearfully beneath his skin. He never met strangers out here. No one came this far into the fields these days, not since before the war. So who was this man who moved towards him with such a determined stride? As the man drew closer, Feliciano noticed with a gasp that he was incredibly beautiful. He looked to be in his late twenties, and wore a well-pressed suit and thin wire glasses. His dark brown hair fell over his stunning face, his expression solemn but kind. Feliciano waited, confused. This man did not look like anyone from the village. Strangely, however, Feliciano did not feel afraid anymore, and took a single step forward. The man stopped a few paces away, smiled just faintly, and said, "Feliciano Vargas?"

Feliciano felt his mouth drop open and his eyes widen. Stunned and confused, he could only stammer, "But who... what… how do you know my name?"

The man lowered his head slightly. "I beg your pardon." He spoke in English, with a familiar accent. "I do not speak Italian. I was told you spoke English?"

"Oh." Feliciano switched to English. "Yes. I'm sorry, I was just wondering who…"

"My name is Roderich Edelstein. I am here on behalf of one who can not come himself."

And then Feliciano could not hear. His mind went blank. He felt his hands fly uncontrollably to his face, felt himself fall back against the tree behind him. His chest choked closed and a familiar, horrifying, burning panic raced through his veins. He shook his head, but he could not see or think, and when he tried to take a breath he only managed a strangled gasp. He did not want to hear this… he did not want to know… Roderich appeared through the closing shadow, his unusual violet eyes wide with concern. His voice came from far away.

"Feliciano, please. Listen to me. I have been sent by Ludwig Beilschmidt. I've come to take you to him, if you wish to go."

Ludwig... Feliciano suddenly understood. Air flooded his lungs, the brightness of the afternoon came flooding back, and everything made bright, clear, beautiful sense. Of course! He did not understand how, or why, or when it had happened. But he was not sad, or stunned; instead, he felt himself overwhelmed with joy. The whole world faded to nothing then burst back, sparkling and new. Feliciano laughed joyfully, loud and clear and brilliant. "Oh, gosh. I did not even realise I was dead!"

Roderich blinked silently for a moment, his expression furrowing in confusion. "I'm sorry? Dead?"

Feliciano laughed again. "Well, yes, of course. And you are an angel. You must be, because you're so beautiful, and you are taking me to Ludwig, and that must mean I am dead. And you are a German angel, also, because when you speak you sound like Ludwig did, only not as deep and shy and nice. How *did* I die anyway? Oh, but that doesn't matter, none of that matters, can I go to him now? Can you take me to him? Please?"

Roderich looked completely bewildered, then broke into laughter and shook his head. "He did say you were a strange one. No, Feliciano, I am not an angel. You're not dead. And neither is Ludwig."

"I'm not?" Feliciano paused to contemplate this unexpected change of circumstance. Everything slowed and spun around him. The gusting wind, the descending sun. This only made sense if he was dead. That, he could understand. That, he could accept. This was too much. "Then he's… then Ludwig…"

"Is alive. In Germany." Roderich laughed again, softly. "And thinking of nothing but you."

Feliciano's body turned cold and still. He could not understand it, could not quite grasp it. It was too incredibly breathtaking, too strange and sudden, and if he started to believe it, he would surely lose control. He just breathed deeply, placing a hand to his chest to steady the familiar wave of overwhelming sensation. *Ludwig*… "No." Feliciano shook his head again. "I'm dreaming. Or I'm imagining, or… are you sure I'm not dead?"

Roderich nodded. "Quite sure."

Feliciano's frozen body seemed to melt. Sweat broke on his forehead, his pulse raced burning through his veins. "It's just, I… I've waited so long, and everyone said Ludwig was… was dead, or lost, and that I should forget him, and so I thought I'd never see him, I believed I'd never see him, I was certain I would only see him again when I died, but… but if he's alive, then… You don't understand, this is too much, and it's been so long, and I don't know…"

"Breathe, Feliciano."

It was only when Roderich said the words that Feliciano realised he was shaking and breathless. He put his hands to his knees and leant down, taking deep gasping breaths. Doubt still crowded his mind. This couldn't be real, there must be something wrong… "Why did Ludwig not come himself?"

Roderich paused, then simply said, "He tried."

Feliciano's eyes stung as his throat choked with these overpowering emotions he had spent years trying to suppress. "And you, how… who…"

Roderich's voice remained calm, steady. "I am a friend of Ludwig's brother's. Of Gilbert's."

Feliciano's head spun, still refusing to let him accept this. Roderich knew his name, knew Ludwig and Gilbert, but still… "But how do I know…"

Roderich answered the question before Feliciano asked it. "He has your photograph. He kept it all these years. You are smiling, and wearing his jacket. There are two words on the back – *bella ciao.*"

The tears spilt over. Only moments ago this had been just another autumn afternoon by the oak tree. Now it felt like Feliciano's life had stopped short and begun again. *Ludwig*. Ludwig was alive. Ludwig existed somewhere in the world, and Feliciano was going to see him again. Feliciano felt like laughing, like screaming, like falling to the ground in thanks. But he just looked up finally, straightened, and nodded as he wiped away his tears. "Can we leave now?"

Roderich smiled kindly in response. "I'm sure your Grandpa would like to say goodbye."

"I think probably the worst I've ever seen Gilbert act was in Czechoslovakia one summer." Antonio leant forward on the couch as he spoke in English, his green eyes sparkling, his face vibrant and smiling. "And I'm telling you, when I say the worst I've ever seen Gilbert act, that is saying a hell of a lot."

Roderich raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, I believe you. But I definitely think I have a few stories to challenge yours." Roderich shook his head and breathed out a short, incredulous breath of laughter. "I still can't believe I would meet a friend of Gilbert's here in Italy!" Roderich placed his wine glass gently on the table beside his armchair. Feliciano noticed that everything the man did was refined, gentle. It was hard to believe he had been in the army.

Antonio and Roderich had been trading stories for over an hour now, delirious with excitement that they had each found another acquaintance of Gilbert Beilschmidt. Feliciano was stunned to learn that Antonio had been friends with Ludwig's older brother for years, although it did explain a few things. Antonio laughed in response to Roderich. He wasn't even coughing, or clutching his chest in pain. Antonio's mental state had improved remarkably in the last few years, but this was still unusual – it was the happiest Feliciano had seen him since before the war. He almost sounded like his old self again. "I learnt long ago that the world delivers the strangest things, right when you don't expect them." Antonio grinned at Lovino, who just rolled his eyes and looked away.

Feliciano could barely keep still on the couch opposite Antonio. Brilliant, dreamlike, uncontrollable happiness ran through his veins like a rushing tide, soaring through his chest and his head and turning the world bright with deafening, dazzling colour. Every impossible dream Feliciano had held for four long years was right before him, inside him, bursting around him; each of those four years of uncertainty fading and falling and crashing to nothing. Grandpa Roma sat beside him, smiling warmly and pouring wine freely. Lovino sat beside Antonio, his face radiant with happiness as he watched Antonio speak of old memories of Ludwig's brother Gilbert. But even now, with everyone talking and drinking and happy together, Feliciano could only think of leaving; of getting to Ludwig, seeing him and holding him and knowing this time it would be forever. Tomorrow was too long to wait.

"So what did happen with Gilbert in Czechoslovakia?" asked Lovino, lifting his wine to his lips and lowering his head. Feliciano giggled softly. Lovino was trying so hard to hide his smile.

Antonio put down his drink so he could gesture with his right arm; his shattered left had been amputated the year before. "Well. Have you ever tried absinthe?"

Everyone shook their heads but Roma, who sighed and said, "Once, in Egypt. The girl was beautiful. We drank the green nectar and inhaled sweet-smelling smoke from a gilded hookah. I'm still not sure if the snakes were real."

Feliciano and Roderich laughed, Lovino cried, "Grandpa!" indignantly, and Antonio grinned and leant forward again.

"Ah, but I assure you, Signore, that Egyptian hookah has nothing on Czech absinthe. This stuff is genuinely intense. Gilbert, Francis and I were in a little Czech tavern when Gilbert decided to try some. Because of course, Gilbert can handle anything." Roderich laughed softly at that. "So, he stands up in the middle of the tavern, shouts 'This Czech piss is like lemonade to a German!' then downs half the bottle."

Roderich rolled his eyes, smiling, and Feliciano gasped loudly. "No!"

"I swear, his eyes just about popped right out of his head and rolled across the floor!"

"What did he do then?" asked Lovino, peering sideways up at Antonio.

Antonio laughed as he replied. "Gilbert… lost his mind. He started screaming that he had to get back to Germany that instant. He ran out onto the street, grabbed some poor passerby by the collar, and screamed, *'WIE KOMME ICH NACH BERLIN?'"*

"Oh, oh!" said Feliciano excitedly, as the others laughed loudly. He had been learning German since the war ended. He was proud he could translate Antonio's last sentence. "'How do I get to Berlin?' Yes?"

"*Sehr gut,* Feli!" smiled Antonio, and Feliciano felt a shiver run up his spine at the words. To think he might hear Ludwig say them again… soon… Antonio gestured again with his arm as he spoke. "The terrified man shouted back, 'Vlak! Vlak!' So Gilbert takes off down the street, running up to every man he passes and shouting, 'I'm looking for Vlak! Are you Vlak?'"

"What were *you* doing?" Lovino managed to ask through his laughter. "Shouldn't you have tried to stop him?"

Antonio's eyes widened incredulously. "Are you kidding? It was hilarious! Francis and I followed a few paces behind just laughing hysterically as Gilbert ran around like a lunatic on the streets of Prague screaming, 'I need Vlak to take me home to Berlin!'"

Roderich looked strangely unsurprised. "He found a Vlak, didn't he."

Antonio smirked. "Oh, he did. A Mr Jakub Vlak, police inspector, who took a very willing and enthusiastic Gilbert into custody. We rushed over and tried to explain, but Gilbert seemed

rather delighted, and quite content that Mr Vlak would get him back to Berlin."

Roderich put a hand to his forehead. There was still a small, reflective smile on his lips, but his expression turned briefly pained. "*Mein Gott*, Gilbert…"

"It took Francis and I all afternoon in a police station, speaking some ridiculous mixture of nine languages because neither of us spoke Czech, trying to convince the officers not to send Gilbert to a lunatic asylum. Luckily in that time he sobered up just enough to prove he wasn't *completely* insane, just very drunk, and they finally let us go."

"Just like that?" asked Roma doubtfully.

Antonio's eyes brightened. "Not before giving us a map to the nearest train station and telling us to be on our way. So we drag Gilbert out of there, open up the map, and what do we see written where the train station is?"

Lovino breathed out an exclamation of realisation. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. 'Vlak.'" Antonio leant back and picked up his drink. "It's Czech for 'train.'"

Everyone again burst into laughter. Roderich shook his head, a wistful expression of bittersweet memory on his face. "That sounds just like Gilbert."

Antonio smiled understandingly. "He's a bit overbearing sometimes. But he's so much fun. And a good man, also."

Roderich shrugged, his expression again contorting softly in pain. "He is the best man I have ever known." Feliciano tilted his head thoughtfully as he regarded Roderich closely. What he knew so far was that Roderich had been with Gilbert on the Russian Front. It was not difficult to see that he also loved Gilbert deeply. Roderich sighed softly, reached for his wine glass, and Feliciano squinted when he noticed a strange mark just above the Austrian's wrist.

"Roderich, why is there a number on your arm?"

Roderich froze. A heavy silence fell in the room. Feliciano felt immediately confused. Lovino and Antonio both glanced at Roderich's wrist, then quickly looked away. Feliciano started to worry he had done something wrong.

"Don't be rude, Feli," said Lovino softly.

Feliciano felt his forehead furrow. Why was it rude to ask about the number on Roderich's arm? "But, I just…"

"No, it's fine." Roderich smiled, but he pulled his sleeve down over his wrist. Then he glanced sideways at Feliciano, raising an eyebrow conspiratorially. "That's how many Russians I killed on the Front."

Feliciano gasped, astounded. The number was at least six digits long. "Oh my gosh!"

"You must be an excellent shot," said Antonio, but he said it softly, sadly, with a small, understanding smile.

Feliciano had the feeling he was missing something. Uncertain, he asked, "Did you really kill that many Russians, Roderich?"

Roderich breathed a strange, sadly amused sigh. "No Feliciano, not that many." He looked down, his smile fell, and his eyes darkened. "Only one."

Feliciano did not know what to think of that. The next silence only lasted a moment, however, before Lovino nodded at Feliciano. "Feli. Grandpa has gone to the kitchen. He might want to speak to you."

Feliciano looked at the empty space beside him with a jolt. He had not even noticed Roma leave. Suddenly fearful of what his grandpa might be thinking of him leaving tomorrow, Feliciano quickly excused himself and headed for the kitchen.

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Roma stood at the kitchen window, watching the autumn leaves dance past on the evening breeze. He almost laughed to himself. Of course - it had to be autumn. Why did everyone he loved leave him in autumn?

"Grandpa? Are… are you all right?" Roma turned, and felt his heart pull at the sight of his grandson standing, small and uncertain, in the kitchen doorway. He sounded so unsure. Roma smiled, sighed, and shrugged slightly.

"I guess I'm just a little sad, Feli."

Feliciano gasped and walked further into the room, his eyebrows drawing together with worry. "Oh no! Please don't be sad! Don't be sad when I am so happy!"

"And you are happy now, aren't you?" As a child, Feliciano was so bright and cheerful. Roma had never known a happier child since his daughter, his Renaissa. Seeing Feli silent and cheerless was wrong, painful, and yet it was far too common these last few years. Roma had only ever wanted to protect his grandsons. He wanted them to be safe. He wanted them to be secure. Roma wanted everything for his grandsons.

But Feliciano was not that happy little child anymore. He was no longer Roma's to protect. Roma could not pretend to understand it: how both his grandsons had fallen in love with men. But Roma had come too close to losing them both, and he would be a fool to let something like this be the reason he lost them for good. And even though he did not understand it, Roma could not change the simple fact that Feliciano loved this German. Today was the first time Roma had seen him truly smile in months. Roma had accepted Antonio for Lovino's sake; accepting this German was the only way Feliciano would ever be completely happy again. And Roma realised that, more than anything else, all he really wanted was for his grandsons to be happy.

"I don't know how or why, but I suppose this German is to you what my Helena was to me." Roma smiled sadly. Not a day passed since he lost her that Roma did not miss his beautiful Helen of Troy. That he did not remember her smile, or her laugh, or her sarcastic jokes. That he did not dream of her. That he did not think how proud she would have been of her remarkable daughter, and her strong, delightful, brave grandsons. "Feli," said Roma softly. "You'll never truly be happy without this German."

Feliciano nodded, though he looked slightly troubled. He looked up with wide, anxious eyes. "Grandpa… his name is Ludwig."

Roma gritted his teeth and tried not to flinch. This man was a German, he had taken vital information from Feliciano and taken it to the occupying military, he was the reason Feliciano was shot and nearly killed. He had also risked the Gestapo to rescue an enemy, and more than that, he was the man Feliciano loved. Roma took a deep breath and nodded. "Feliciano, Ludwig is your happiness. And all I've ever wanted for you, is your happiness." Roma laughed shortly. "I just never thought you'd have to go to Germany to get it."

Feliciano broke into a brilliant smile; the kind that lit up the room, the kind he used to flash so easily and so often. Roma's heart soared to see it. "You wouldn't try to stop me?"

Roma could not hold back another laugh. "Do you think I could?"

"No." Feliciano laughed with him, and Roma thought that anything was worth it to hear that sound again.

"I don't think so, either. Now. I've spoken with Roderich." Roma had only spoken with Roderich shortly, but it did not take long to see that he was a good, honest man. "He looks a little delicate, sure, but to survive… well, what he's been through, he must be a damn sight tougher than he looks. Stay with him."

Feliciano nodded. "I will, Grandpa."

Roma regarded Feliciano for a few moments in silence. He could not even say when he realised how much Feliciano had grown up. Twenty-three years old, and Roma could not stop thinking of his Feli as a child. Perhaps, in a way, he always would; regardless of how far from the truth that actually was. "I'm so proud of you, Feli."

"You are?"

It hurt Roma to see that Feliciano was so surprised by the words. "Do you remember, I told you once - you follow your heart. You follow your happiness. Feli - you're the bravest man I know." Roma ran a hand through his hair and sighed wearily. Why did it feel like he was saying goodbye?

"I will come back, Grandpa," said Feliciano earnestly.

Roma blinked heavily, taken back. "Damn straight, you'll come back. Who said anything about not coming back? By God, you're coming back."

Feliciano raised his hands, laughing. "I know, I know!" Roma gave him a warning glance, smiling, then pulled him into his arms. Feliciano hugged him tightly. "I love you, Grandpa."

Roma held him close, remembering a simpler time - when Feliciano knew nothing of passion and love, when he was small enough to protect. Roma was terrified of Feliciano going so far away, even if only for a short time. After all, Roma always wanted his grandsons to be safe. But he had seen Feliciano safe and miserable at home, and he had seen his overflowing joy at the mere mention of this pilot in Germany. It had taken Roma too long to see the truth: he could never be happy if his grandsons weren't.

Roma pulled away and gently pressed the palm of his hand to Feliciano's chest. Feliciano's scar was hidden beneath his shirt, but Roma knew exactly where it was. The image of that bullet being dug from his skin was imprinted in Roma's memory. "I'm so sorry I was not strong enough to protect you, Feli."

"It's okay, Grandpa. No one is strong enough to control everything." Feliciano smiled, almost like he was remembering something. "And nothing can protect you from love."

A small village in Germany…

Aldrich Beilschmidt turned away briefly, closed his eyes, and ran a hand through his long, white hair. Ludwig had barely moved from his place by the window for weeks. He had not spoken since Roderich had left for Italy. And now, once again, he even refused the food brought to him. Aldrich placed it on the table by his grandson's side, but Ludwig did not turn his eyes from the falling leaves outside.

Aldrich always thought of himself as a decent man. He did his duty by his country, having fought for its honour and attained the rank of Major during the Great War. He worked hard as a clockmaker until his shop's destruction during the recent bombings. He was honest, he was loyal. But the greatest achievements of Aldrich's life were his grandsons. After his son and daughter-in-law's deaths, Aldrich did what he could to raise the boys to be good, honourable men. He sold everything he had to send Ludwig to flight school. He'd tried his hardest with Gilbert, damn it, and at least he'd kept the boy from a jail cell. Aldrich had only ever wanted to support and strengthen his grandsons. He wanted them to be successful. He wanted them to be respected. Aldrich wanted everything that mattered for his grandsons.

But then this war erupted. It turned his country against itself; it glorified what was evil and silenced what was good. It made Aldrich a dissident, and it tore his grandsons from him. For years Aldrich watched the seasons pass alone. Watched his great, beautiful country brought to its knees. Watched Ludwig's name disappear from the propaganda papers and fade into obscurity. Watched the reported number of casualties from the Russian Front rise and rise, with no word of Gilbert. Aldrich lost hope. Lost faith. Lost everything. He was heartbroken, he was bitter. And he was angry. Because in the end, what was it for? The years he had spent nurturing his boys, teaching them and guiding them and loving them; the joy and pain, the effort and care of raising two boys to men. What was it for if they could be destroyed so easily by events out of their control?

But then this strange, dreamlike, startling autumn drifted around, and Aldrich gained back some of what he had lost. A young, quiet, refined Austrian brought him respect and gratitude and news of Gilbert, brought him deep and profound pride for his eldest grandson. And when Ludwig was finally brought home mere weeks later, for the first time in years, Aldrich had hope. Ludwig was empty and lost and hurt. He did not smile, he did not laugh. He barely spoke, but when he did, it was of one place and one person. Of a village in Italy, of oak trees and red flowers and songs of love and resistance. Of long, yellow grass and pouring rain and gunshots on a clear, warm night. Of a young man with bright eyes and a brighter smile, whose torn, blood-stained photograph Ludwig clung to like it was the one thing in the world that could possibly save him.

Aldrich always wanted his grandsons to be successful. But he had seen Ludwig celebrated and esteemed as a pilot of the glorious Third Reich, and he'd seen him brought home broken, discarded, and forgotten. Now Aldrich knew that more than anything else, he wanted his grandsons to be happy. He wanted Ludwig to be happy. And strangely enough, it looked like the only thing that could bring him this happiness was a young Italian man he'd known for mere days, years ago.

Aldrich thought he had lost both his grandsons. Against all odds, he had one back, one who was hanging on a precipice. Aldrich refused to lose him again. So if this mysterious little Italian was the thing to truly bring Ludwig back, then Aldrich prayed for his swift arrival with a faith he had lost long ago.

Aldrich looked back at Ludwig staring blankly out the window, staring with eyes that saw nothing but long ago winter days in the Italian countryside.

And he hoped it was not too late.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

If you are interested in Roderich and Gilbert's story, please check out my on-going fic 'Lily of the Lamplight.' Antonio and Lovino's is told in 'Bésame Mucho.' :-)

I am sorry for the terribly long wait for this chapter. There will not be a long wait for the next one. :-)

Chapter 17

Feliciano raced along the long train platform, pushing through the mass of waiting passengers, apologising and laughing as they stared bewilderedly after him. He turned to check that Roderich was still in sight behind and spotted him easily through the crowd, dressed in his elegant dark suit and carrying his small, simple suitcase. He gave a little nod and Feliciano laughed again, swinging his own small case beside him as he spun around and headed for the far end of the platform.

They all looked rather important, these people who crowded the busy station, like they had something urgent to do and somewhere special to go. Feliciano felt like he was one of them, even though his simple wool jacket and flat brown cap weren't nearly so fancy as the men's black suits and the ladies' lovely dresses. But he belonged here just as well, since he also had somewhere special to go. Feliciano tore through a small group of closely huddled gentlemen, accidentally knocking their newspapers in a falling flurry, then past a cluster of pretty girls in bright dresses who laughed and flipped their hair when he took off his cap and flashed them a grin.

Feliciano could not remember ever feeling this excited, this alive. Not since before Ludwig left, and that could have been a lifetime ago. The cool air flowed fresh on the wind and in his lungs, the bright sun shone warm in the sky and on his face. Intense, almost painful excitement had bubbled in Feliciano's chest since morning, since he had left his little farmhouse and his little village and everything he had ever known. Since he had thrown his arms around Lovino, promising him they'd take their own train ride together one day; had kissed Antonio's cheeks, promising to bring him back real German tomato schnapps; had been swung wildly in Grandpa Roma's arms, laughing, promising to come home. Even the long car ride to the city had not dimmed Feliciano's excitement. The drive had simply increased it; travelling down roads and through towns he had never seen, knowing that every turn of the tyres was taking him closer to Ludwig.

Feliciano wondered, briefly, if he should be afraid. He was used to feeling that way, after all. But even though this was new, even though he was leaving everything he had ever known, even though he did not know what to expect - Feliciano could not be afraid. Because Feliciano was going to Ludwig. He was going to his happiness, and his peace, and the place his heart had been leading him for years. It wasn't their oak tree, but that didn't matter. Because wherever he was, whether in Italy, or Germany, or the moon, Ludwig was his somewhere else – Ludwig was where he belonged. Feliciano was going somewhere he had never dreamt of, yet at the same time, he was going home.

By the time Feliciano reached the far platform, a long line of travellers had already formed, jostling and talking loudly and fumbling for tickets. Feliciano literally jumped in excitement when only moments later, a huge red train tore, steaming and screaming and whistling, down the line and into the station. "It's our train!" he cried out gleefully. "Roderich, Roderich, it's our train, it's here, our train is here, Roderich!"

Roderich finally reached him, adjusting his glasses wearily and letting out a very deep breath. "Yes, yes, Feliciano." But even if he had a slight exasperation to his voice, he was also smiling, and did not try to hush Feliciano up as the surrounding crowd stared at them openly.

When the train came to a slow, steady stop, Roderich took Feliciano's arm, leading him past the long line and up towards the front of the machine. They stopped before a long, polished door that read *First.* All this was brand new to Feliciano, and he watched with rapt interest as Roderich showed his tickets to the man beside the door, who bowed his head and motioned them inside. Feliciano practically pushed Roderich aside in his haste to get on the carriage, but once there, he stood at a bit of a loss. Feliciano had never been on a train before, had never even seen pictures, and all these doors leading off the long, red carpeted corridor just confused him. Roderich smiled as he passed. "First class passengers have separate compartments. We're just up here, Feliciano."

Feliciano nodded, hefting his bag under his arm and following Roderich to a compartment at the end of the hall. Inside, deep brown leather benches faced each other beside the tall windows, alongside a shiny wooden table and elaborate light fixtures. Long, gold ties held back dark red curtains, and plush, red material carpeted the floors. The compartment was only around the size of his bathroom at home, but it looked like pictures Feliciano had seen of hotels and restaurants in places like London and New York. Feliciano stood still and whistled softly. "I had no idea trains were so fancy."

Roderich gave a tiny shrug as he placed his suitcase on the rack overhead. "It is pleasant enough. The line from Berlin to Vienna had slightly larger compartments." Roderich took Feliciano's bag and Feliciano bounced into the big, comfortable seat by the window, staring around and wishing he had brought his camera to take photographs for Lovino.

"You must be really rich, huh, Roderich?" Roderich just let out a short breath of laughter, placing a newspaper from his pocket on the table and taking the opposite bench. Feliciano turned to him and grinned. "How long until we get to Berlin?"

Roderich bit his lip, trying to hold back his laughter. "Two days, Feliciano. But this is an Italian train, so…" Roderich shrugged apologetically. "Possibly longer."

Feliciano's shoulders fell and his heart sank. He had not expected the journey to be so long – how could he possibly wait so long? "Oh."

Roderich's smile turned kind. "But I brought some books. And the kitchen serves quite excellent cuisine."

Feliciano immediately brightened. "Do they make pasta?"

Roderich laughed again. "I *said* this was an Italian train."

The afternoon passed as quickly as Feliciano expected – which was, of course, far too slowly. Feliciano tried what he could to take his mind off waiting. He went for a long walk along the length of the train, into carriages darker and shabbier than his and Roderich's, and tried to guess where passengers were from by chattering at them in a mixture of three languages. He

cuddled a fluffy puppy belonging to a little girl from Salzburg in second class and had a very interesting chat about buttons with a nice Roman lady in third. He raced all the way back to his seat in first class, saluting the stewards on the way, and put his limited German into practice by shouting, "*Hallo! Ich bin italienisch!*" at a passing Austrian couple who rolled their eyes and nodded as though that sentence seemed to explain something.

As the evening drew on, Feliciano flicked through Roderich's books on the German language and culture, disappointed at the lack of pictures of any kind. He stared out the window and tried to guess exactly what part of the beautiful Italian countryside they were currently travelling through. He headed out into the hall, chatting with the stewards and juggling oranges from the food cart and playing marbles on the floor with a little English boy who kept telling him he 'spoke funny.' He prodded Roderich with questions about Berlin and Ludwig's village and what Ludwig's grandfather was like and how much longer it would be until they finally arrived because this endless, interminable day just seemed to stretch on forever. And when the dinner bell finally rang, Feliciano jumped up and raced into the hall, desperate for another distraction.

The first-class dining car was even fancier than the rest of the train, and Feliciano was delighted to see that Roderich was right about the cuisine. Feliciano finished his fettuccine pesto so quickly that Roderich gave him the rest of his own, explaining that he didn't eat that much anymore. By the time they arrived back at their compartment, the light had long since faded outside. The gold lamps flickered brightly, and still the constant, whirling, restless excitement turning in Feliciano's stomach and buzzing through his veins refused to subside. He simply did not know what to do with himself. How could he possibly sit in this seat, quiet and still, for another two days? How could he sleep, how could he breathe, how could he stop for one moment to think, when Ludwig was so close? No, he had to keep moving. Had to keep talking. Feliciano practically bounced in his chair as he spoke. "Roderich, where do you think we are? Are we still in Italy? I wonder if we've crossed into Austria… Roderich, what is Austria like? What is your home like? Is it…"

"Vienna is the most beautiful city in the world." Roderich interrupted smoothly, taking his seat opposite Feliciano and drawing the red curtains shut. "It has changed slightly since the war, but anywhere you go, you can always hear music playing. In the park, on Sundays, people come dressed in their finest clothes and waltz to the tune of a full orchestra, all afternoon. In the winter, small choirs sing Christmas carols on street corners in the snow. And sometimes…"

Feliciano rested his head on a pillow against the wall, listening to Roderich's soft, calming, almost hypnotic voice. Vienna sounded wonderful. Feliciano immediately decided to see it with Ludwig. And they would see Berlin together, and Paris, and London, and maybe they could even go to America one day. He and Ludwig could go anywhere, now - together. Feliciano closed his eyes as he imagined it. No bombs echoing off the mountains. No enemy planes flying overhead. No sunset when Ludwig would have to turn and leave. Just Feliciano, and Ludwig, and the entire world…

Before he knew it, the room had gone silent and Feliciano realised Roderich had long since stopped talking. He shook himself from his haze, looked up at Roderich and asked, a little dazedly, "What time is it?"

Roderich put down the book he had started reading, pulled his pocket watch from his pocket, then blinked as though surprised when he clicked it open. "9:55pm." His eyes softened and he breathed a short sigh of laughter, as though he was remembering something.

Feliciano tilted his head in confusion. "Why is that funny?"

Roderich shook his head. "Never mind, Feliciano. But I think it is time for you to get some sleep."

The very mention of the word turned Feliciano's stomach cold. He swallowed heavily and looked down at his feet, ran a hand through his hair, twisted his fingers together, then jumped when Roderich's hand rested gently on his as though to still him. He glanced up, surprised, to see Roderich looking slightly concerned. "Calm down, Feliciano. What's wrong?"

Feliciano took a deep breath. His wild excitement had dulled somewhat, and now he was starting to feel a slightly nervous twisting in his stomach. "I'm scared that if I go to sleep I'll wake up tomorrow in my bed at home and this will have all been a dream and then I'll never see Ludwig, and I want to see him so much, even if this *is* only a dream, even if I have to stay awake for three days so I don't end up back in my own bed."

Roderich stared at Feliciano blankly for a few moments, as though absorbing his rapid-fire words. Then he smiled softly. "I promise you, Feliciano, you're not dreaming. You are really here. We really are going to Germany, and you really are going to see Ludwig very, very soon."

Somehow, Feliciano found that Roderich's calm, kind words reassured him. The whole frantic afternoon caught up with him, his eyelids grew heavy, and the next thing Feliciano knew, he was blinking blearily in complete darkness. He realised that he must have fallen asleep, and immediately broke into a cold, panicked sweat. No, no… What if he was back home? What if this was all over? Feliciano wrenched himself upright and turned his head, almost expecting to see Lovino's bed across the room. Instead he saw Roderich sitting opposite him, holding the curtains slightly aside and staring out the window, his violet eyes shining in the early morning moonlight.

Feliciano rubbed his eyes and sighed quietly in relief. "Can't you sleep?"

Roderich glanced up at him, a little startled, then shrugged slightly. "I'm just thinking."

"About Gilbert?" Roderich froze and Feliciano winced. He had tried to avoid that very subject all day, and now, in the dark, silent hours of the early morning, he just blurted it out without thinking. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that, should I?"

"It's all right. I wasn't thinking of…" Roderich broke off and sighed quietly, shakily. "Well, I suppose I was, in a way. I suppose I'm always thinking of him in some way."

"I understand. I used to wonder sometimes, about what happened to Ludwig. You might think I'd wonder all the time, but I didn't, because that hurt too much. But even if I wasn't directly thinking about him, I still always sort of was, you know?" Feliciano paused, wondering if he was really helping the matter or just making it worse. He never did know quite what to say in

these situations. He followed Roderich's gaze out the window and, in the full moonlight, could easily make out tall, white peaked mountains in the distance. It was easier to believe where he was going and what was happening in this eerie, moonlit stillness. "He'll be happy to see me again, won't he?"

"Feliciano, he lives to see you again."

Feliciano nodded, a bright spark of warmth flaring in his chest at the words. "Thank you for coming to Italy. To get me. I mean, it is such a long way to go, and I know that you love Ludwig's brother and so you must care about Ludwig too, I mean I'm sure I would care about Gilbert if I ever met him, but… oh no, I shouldn't have said that, should I? I just mean… well…" Feliciano stopped just briefly to collect his jumpy thoughts. "Why did you come so far? Why are you doing this?"

Silence; even the rattling of the train engine seemed to soften. Feliciano knew he'd asked too much. But Roderich still answered, even though it took him a few moments to do so. "You are right. Gilbert loves his brother, and I owe Gilbert everything. So of course I will do all I can to help Ludwig." Roderich again fell silent, staring out at the passing landscape, still and otherworldly under the blue waning moon and the sparse dusting of twinkling stars. Feliciano waited for him to continue. He still did not know much of this graceful Austrian who had fallen so unexpectedly into his life, but he knew he already trusted every single thing the man said. There was something about the calm, gentle, honest way he spoke that made it impossible not to. "There are many types of love in this world, Feliciano. Some are quiet, and comfortable, and smoulder softly. Some blaze brightly and fade fast. But some - and this is very rare - some burn forever." A small, distant smile appeared on Roderich's lips. "They change everything you ever thought you were, and at the same time, make you more yourself than you could ever be alone. Not everyone finds it. True, not everyone wants it. But if you do find it, or if it finds you, the whole world changes, and you realise that the true purpose of your being was simply to have been in that person's life, and them in yours. I think I am right in saying that you understand this."

Feliciano breathed cautiously in the silence. He was afraid to break it. His eyes drifted to Roderich's arm holding back the curtain, and that number etched crudely down his forearm, stark and harsh in the soft, pale light. *354471*. Again Feliciano asked, before meaning to do so, "That number. Why is it really on your arm?"

"Because once, a number is all I was." Roderich clutched his marked arm, his eyes far away. "People do terrible things in this world, Feliciano. Things I will never forget, and never understand. And that's why we have to hold onto the beautiful things."

Feliciano did not want to know what terrible things Roderich referred to. He could tell it was something too painful and too unsettlingly wrong to speak of. So instead, he asked about the beautiful things. "Is that why you came for me?"

Roderich finally turned his head, his violet eyes staring directly into Feliciano's. They were deep, and sad, and seemed older than the rest of him. Feliciano suddenly wondered exactly what Roderich had been through during the war; what evil those eyes had seen. "I have seen too many lives destroyed." Roderich smiled suddenly, and somehow, his quiet joy seemed as intense as his sadness. "How could I not wish to see two remade?"

Feliciano felt happy, sad, and overwhelmingly grateful. He closed his eyes and simply said, "*Danke,* Roderich." A small smile tugged at his lips. "You are sort of my brother, in a way, aren't you?"

Roderich laughed breathily, then his cool hand smoothed gently across Feliciano's own. "Yes, Feliciano. Now go back to sleep."

The train continued travelling on, unending, interminable. Sometimes Feliciano slept, sometimes he couldn't. When he was awake, either pacing restless along the corridor outside the compartments, or chattering incessantly at Roderich, or watching the changing view of the Alps out the train window, all Feliciano thought of was Ludwig. The low buzz of excitement was still there, but this nervous waiting seemed to be slowly drowning it; this desperate longing growing stronger, constant. Through neat little villages and narrow mountain passes and tiny Austrian towns; over rolling green vales and blue, trickling rivers and pretty yellow fields. Constant, and unchanging, until the countryside turned darker and Roderich told him they were heading into Germany. Feliciano felt a leap in his chest at the words, then pressed himself against the window, desperate to take it all in.

Here, the broad, dark fields were untilled, bordered by wild, shady forest outskirts. White, craggy hills overlooked steep, tree-dusted valleys. Strong, solitary castles peppered the mountainous horizon, and the rivers they crossed were wild and gushing. The towns they passed were broken and ruined, the long, barren streets littered with debris. A dull, aching sort of pain throbbed beneath Feliciano's chest at the sight. So much was ruined here - so much destroyed. But this was Ludwig's land. This was his country, the one he loved and defended and fought for. This was Ludwig's home, and even if it was broken, it was beautiful.

In the end, the journey took nearly three days. The train pulled into the Berlin station in late morning, and Feliciano was not really surprised to find that Roderich had a big, black, shiny automobile with a driver already waiting. Feliciano did not speak as he climbed into the car, exhausted, drained, and growing so nervous that his stomach felt like it was crawling into his throat. With too many thoughts and feelings and worries spinning through his head, Feliciano tried to focus on the landscape outside the window as they drove out of the city and headed west into the countryside. The view of green, forest-rimmed fields and tall, distant mountains did not change for hours, though Feliciano's anxiety worsened with every passing minute. Every now and then Roderich would talk briefly about some castle in the distance, or offer Feliciano an illustrated page from his newspaper, or ask if he wanted to perhaps try and sleep a little. Feliciano could barely respond.

After a few hours they started to drive past widely spaced farmhouses, eventually drawing towards a little walled village. Part of the wall was missing, as though it had been blown away, revealing narrow, winding streets and rows of colourful, peaked buildings like little gingerbread houses. A multi-tiered, shining white castle rested on a forested hill and overlooked the picturesque, tree-bordered town. Feliciano's eyes widened as he tried to take it all in, his chest swelling at the charming yet awe-inspiring sight. It was like something from a fairy-tale. He recognised the place immediately from Ludwig's own description of it, on a long-ago winter afternoon overlooking the Italian countryside – *It is warm and friendly. It is wonderful. It is home.*

At the flash of memory, everything hit Feliciano at once. What was happening, where he was, where he was going. He could barely feel, barely hope, everything turning painfully real and meltingly dreamlike at the same time. A numbing, throbbing, almost terrifying anxiety overcame him, and Feliciano clutched the old wound in his chest, trying to think and trying to breathe as the whole incredible reality of these last few days pressed down on him. The car hurtled forwards, unstoppable, carrying Feliciano to his one final destination, to his purpose and his reason. To his somewhere else.

The car turned slowly into a narrow, pretty, cobblestone street. When they finally drew to a stop before a small wooden house with a peaked roof and flower-bordered windows, Feliciano was quite certain for a moment that he was going to pass out. His heart hammered beneath his skin, his breathing came too fast, and the old pain in his chest started to flare.

"We're here, Feliciano." Roderich opened the door for him, reaching out a steadying hand, and Feliciano stood on shaky legs. He could not answer. The rising anxiety reached almost painful levels, in his chest, his head, his veins; it turned his body numb and his mind to fog. Roderich did not need to lead him up the little hedge-trimmed trail that led to the house. Feliciano simply saw the door and felt himself drawn towards it, though he was unsure how he put one foot in front of the other. He did not have to knock - the door opened almost the second he reached it. Feliciano looked up, his breath freezing and his heart stopping, into a face like Ludwig's but older; stern and serious and framed by waist-length white hair. Ludwig's grandfather. He regarded Feliciano blankly, raised an eyebrow, and flicked his eyes to Roderich and back. Feliciano just stared.

"Please, sir, I…" Feliciano stopped when he realised he was speaking Italian. He thought frantically, but every single word he knew in both German and English abruptly flew from his mind. He was not even sure he could properly manage Italian. He froze in panic for a moment before saying simply, "Ludwig."

The stern German's eyes softened slightly. His next words were in English. "The little Italian, I presume."

"Feliciano." The word came out as a breathless whisper.

"Feliciano." The tall German looked Feliciano up and down with steely blue eyes, then took one steady step back and nodded down the hallway behind him. "The last door."

Feliciano stared blankly. He understood the words, but somehow, he did not know how to accept them. *The last door…* After all these years, could it really be this easy? Ludwig's grandfather did not repeat himself, however, and eventually Feliciano forced himself to take that long, slow, momentous step across the threshold of the doorway.

Feliciano had been racing and running for the last three days, desperate to keep going and keep moving. But now, here, at the end of the voyage and with Ludwig at the end of the hall, he could barely take a step. It was both too real and too illusory, as Feliciano walked slowly down the hallway in an almost trancelike daze. Images drifted past the corners of his vision: paintings and photographs on the soft white walls, light through the open doors cutting rectangles onto the dark green carpet. Sounds floated, ethereal, through the pulsing silence: a floorboard creaking, a bird singing outside. It all flowed across his senses, sharp and dull, but

Feliciano barely noticed any of it. His gaze remained locked on that final door; his very bones felt drawn towards the end of the hall.

Because in the end, the whole journey had led Feliciano here. The car that took him from the only village he had ever known; the train that carried him through places he'd only dreamt of; the shiny black automobile on the road outside that finally brought Feliciano here, to the most important place in the world. To this house, and this corridor, and that door at the end of the hall.

But it was a longer journey than that. A journey that had started four years ago, on a warm winter afternoon, when a kind German officer with sky-blue eyes first gazed down at Feliciano in the sunlight. A journey Feliciano had remembered and recreated so many times it seemed almost fantastical. Speeches of flying and lavender and loyalty; words spoken in too-lyrical German and too-strong Italian. Stolen glances and songs of resistance, language lessons and soccer games beneath a gnarled old oak tree. Falling against Ludwig's military jacket in a narrow alley that echoed with gunshots; wearing that very same jacket, studded with green leaves and rosemary, during a simple, calm, beautiful walk into the hills. Every day of waiting, every hour of not knowing, every endless second of being without the person Feliciano needed more than anything else in the entire world. All of it had led him here. Every step Feliciano had taken for the last four years had led him here.

But after waiting so long, these last few steps of the journey were almost too much to take. Clenching anxiety rose in Feliciano's chest; hot panic clawed at his throat. What if Ludwig had changed? What if he had moved on? Feliciano's head swam briefly… oh Lord, oh God, what if Ludwig had forgotten him? Feliciano's head felt light as his pulse pounded in his ears. He had been so excited the day before… where had this crippling terror come from? Surely these fears were nonsensical - surely he was being ridiculous. But this situation was too strange, too real; it was too much, too close…

After a deep, dark eternity, Feliciano finally reached the end of the hall. He ran his trembling hand gently over the wooden door - dark, smooth, heavy – then turned the polished handle shakily, pushing it open with an almost painful hesitation. He felt numb, like he was watching all this from far away. Numb to the sensation of his heart pounding in his chest, of sweat beading on his brow; numb to the heavy tread of his feet on the ground. Feliciano stepped nervously, cautiously, desperately, into a small, green courtyard. The warm scent of lavender and rosemary drifted on the cool, fresh air, reassuringly familiar and comforting. Sunlight streamed brilliantly through an intricately latticed ceiling, illuminating the bright, open room, brightening rows of flowers and potted plants and dark wooden furniture. And there, in the corner…

Feliciano froze. His breath stopped; his bones locked. It was only a brief, still, stunned moment before he gasped deeply and put his hands over his eyes. "I'm dreaming." The words came out faintly, unbidden, and he did not know if he spoke them in Italian or English. He could not even look. Of course he was dreaming… because how could he be here? How could *Ludwig* be here? Feliciano's hands shook against his face; his breath sounded fast and heavy in his ears. He had imagined this meeting a thousand times, played it over and over in his mind, and now that it was happening, he didn't know what to do. It was too wonderful to be real, and he was so scared to look, and oh, God, what if this was all…

"Feliciano."

Ludwig's quiet whisper sliced through the still, rushing, pulsing silence. It cut through Feliciano's ears, his head, his heart, and mended all the broken pieces that had lay shattered inside him for years. For one brief, black, silent moment, the world ended. When it flooded back, Feliciano was surprised to find himself still standing. He lifted his hands, opened his eyes, and Ludwig was still there. Still sitting beside the window, still gazing back silently, still a calm and perfect image from Feliciano's memories and dreams. But this time, finally, Feliciano would not have to wake up. Praying his legs would not give out, Feliciano tore across the room. He fell to his knees, threw his arms around Ludwig's shoulders, and finally let the relentless tears that had been building inside him for so long come pouring out. "Ludwig…"

Ludwig gasped and embraced Feliciano desperately, surrounded him with strong arms, almost lifted him from the floor in a frantic embrace. Feliciano could not contain his sobs of relief. He was back where he belonged. He hid his face in Ludwig's chest, clutched at his shirt, touched him and felt him and breathed him. Ludwig's heavy breath sounded broken and unsteady in Feliciano's ears; his chest rose and fell rapidly against Feliciano's cheek. Everything outside this moment disappeared. The haziness in Feliciano's head cleared and sharpened until there was nothing in the world but Ludwig holding him. Feliciano barely managed to speak, choking out shaky words against Ludwig's chest. "Ludwig, please… please tell me…"

"I'm here, Feliciano." Ludwig spoke into Feliciano's hair, his voice heavy and rough. "I'm here with you."

Wild, overflowing, unbearable joy rose in Feliciano's chest. He was made whole with Ludwig's words, and could only laugh at the overwhelming sensation of relief. He could only lean into Ludwig, could only melt into his embrace and feel all of him. Ludwig's skin, his hair, his heartbeat; that still-familiar scent, that strong, gentle warmth. Warm fingertips brushed the tears from his cheeks, and when Feliciano finally looked up, Ludwig stared back as though Feliciano was the only thing that had ever existed or ever mattered.

Ludwig's face was older, thinner. A long, deep scar ran under his eye and across his cheek. His heart clenching, Feliciano reached out and traced a finger lightly over that raised, red scar, as though he could wipe it away. What had caused such a thing? What had been done to him? At the touch of Feliciano's hand, Ludwig closed his eyes and turned his head. Feliciano froze at the movement. Oh, what if Ludwig thought he was disgusted? What if he thought Feliciano was horrified? Feliciano could not stand Ludwig to think that, so he leant forward quickly, unthinkingly, and pressed his lips against the scar. Ludwig's breath stuttered and he returned the kiss, gently, against Feliciano's cheek. His breath tickled Feliciano's ear as he whispered, "Feliciano…"

Feliciano's heart soared. Because a scar meant nothing. Because Ludwig was beautiful, and breathtaking, and perfect, and his eyes were still the bluest thing Feliciano had ever seen. "Ludwig. You are…" Feliciano could finally believe it. He ran his hands over Ludwig's face, touched his lips, and he had to gasp for air, breathless from his laughter and his tears. "You *are* here. Ludwig, I missed you - I missed you so much, and I didn't know if you…"

"I know, Feliciano." Ludwig's hand rested, warm and heavy, on Feliciano's cheek. He brushed the corner of Feliciano's eye with his thumb. "My Feliciano…" Ludwig was older, and changed, but he was also just as Feliciano remembered. Feliciano felt warm, after being cold for so long; he felt right, when things had been so wrong. He was found, after so many years being lost. This was overwhelming and amazing and beautiful and perfect and bright and wonderful, and yet none of those words meant anything, because no mere words could possibly describe this.

Feliciano leant into Ludwig's hand, grasped it with his own. His racing pulse pounded swiftly between their fingers. "I said I would come, Ludwig. Remember? I told you I would come for you if you… if you did not come for me."

Ludwig's eyes darkened, like he did not know whether to laugh or cry, and he whispered. "Yes. I remember."

Feliciano pressed himself closer against Ludwig, ran his hands over his face, his arms, his hair… "And I waited. I waited so long, but I said I would wait, remember - I told you I would wait forever…"

Ludwig's hands trembled, but only slightly. "It's all right." Ludwig held Feliciano tightly, strongly. After all, Ludwig was always the strong one. Feliciano knew Ludwig would keep him from falling apart. "It's all right, Feliciano…"

Ludwig ran a hand soothingly over Feliciano's hair, but the words kept tumbling out, unthinking, as though Feliciano was trying to release the feelings that crowded his chest. He had not anticipated the full, striking effect of this moment; had not realised how strong this would be. "… and… and I worried, also. I worried, and then when Roderich came for me instead of you I thought something might be wrong, isn't that silly?" Feliciano laughed, but Ludwig lowered his eyes. "Oh Ludwig, I was so surprised when Roderich turned up and…" Feliciano did not know how to handle these emotions flooding though him. It was suddenly too much to deal with. "Oh, Ludwig, Roderich is here too! You must come and say hello!"

Feliciano wanted to stay with Ludwig forever. He wanted this to be the way it always was, like the entire world had disappeared, like no one else existed. But these feelings running through him were so strong they were painful, so strange; and he needed to breathe, he needed air; he need to stop, needed to fall deeper… Feliciano tore his hands from Ludwig, forced himself to his feet, and turned – because it was the only way he would stop falling apart. He did not hear Ludwig move behind him, however, and turned to see him still sitting.

All Feliciano could think to do was call him. "Come on, Ludwig!"

Ludwig stared up at Feliciano for an endless moment, his blue eyes strangely lost and empty. The gaze seemed to last for hours. But finally Ludwig breathed out heavily and lowered his head. The simple movement turned Feliciano's blood cold. He stilled, frozen; unable to move, unable to blink. Unable to think it. "Ludwig?" A small, unanswered whisper. "Ludwig, stand up."

Ludwig did not reply. Feliciano's heart dropped, slowly and heavily. A burning chill ran down his spine. He suppressed the sudden thoughts and memories that spun through his head - *I am*

here on behalf of one who can not come himself...

Feliciano shook Roderich's words from his mind. He was over thinking… he was misinterpreting… This time Feliciano said the words firmly, desperately, with a hint of panic. "Ludwig. Stand up, Ludwig."

Ludwig closed his dark blue eyes, slow and silent in the fading sunlight that streamed through the latticed ceiling. The silence lasted too long before he spoke, low and soft and broken. "I can't."

Feliciano paused for a moment. He could not understand the words. He paused to think, to forget, to ignore. Then he shook his head determinedly. He managed one word through the tears that refused to stop falling. "Why?"

"A parting gift from the Russians." Ludwig's voice was still low, still soft. Still broken. His eyes opened slowly, staring at the ground. "A bullet to the spine."

A long silence. "... oh." Feliciano was not sure if he did not understand, or if he did not want to.

Again, it took too long for Ludwig to continue. "I can't stand up, Feliciano. I can't… can't walk. I never will." Ludwig broke off, shuddering, and still Feliciano could not move. Still could not understand. "That's why I'm here." Ludwig spoke with his eyes on the ground, with his hands in his lap. He looked like he was apologising. "Do you think I would be sitting in this room, in this house, in Germany, if I could walk? Do you really think I wouldn't have done anything, everything, to…" Ludwig broke off again. He looked out the window beside him, blinked firmly, breathed deeply before he could finish the sentence. "… to get to you?"

Feliciano could barely move. Seeing his strong, brave Ludwig look so lost and broken was too unexpected. Because always, since the first moment they had met, Ludwig had been the strong one. He had been the one to hold Feliciano, to calm him; to accept him, to sustain him. Even these last few years, not knowing Ludwig's position or his fate, Ludwig had been Feliciano's strength - the very strength Feliciano had clung to when everything else had fallen apart. But now, seeing Ludwig unsure like this, Feliciano realised that he could be the strong one. He was strong enough to accept this – he was strong enough to keep Ludwig from breaking apart.

Feliciano stood still for only the briefest moment more. "Don't cry, Ludwig." He walked to Ludwig slowly. Again he dropped to his knees, a dull, broken thud in the silence, and ran a shaking hand across Ludwig's cheek. Ludwig reached for Feliciano, a stark desperation in his face, and pulled him back into his arms. Feliciano leant into Ludwig's neck, breathing that scent that was still so familiar after four long years. He whispered, brokenly. "Don't cry, Ludwig, because it's all right." Feliciano breathed through these settling, familiar feelings, and he accepted this - because this *was* all right. This was Ludwig, and Feliciano could do this for him. Feliciano could do anything for him.

Ludwig's damp eyelids fluttered closed against Feliciano's cheek. His deep voice sounded pained and devastated. "I'm sorry you came all this way, just to…"

"No." Feliciano said it firmly. He drew back and placed his fingers on Ludwig's soft lips, stopping him before he could say it. He shook his head determinedly. "Don't ever apologise. Don't think of me like that, Ludwig. Don't think that this matters to me like that."

Ludwig nodded, slowly. "I know, I…" He smiled as though realising, as though understanding. "Of course. I know." He laughed, breathlessly, and it was the most beautiful sound Feliciano had ever heard. "Feliciano…"

"Ludwig…" Feliciano smiled back, his chest swelling, and it was like every feeling, every sensation, every particle of joy and longing and aching and bliss hit him at once. He felt lost again in those blue eyes, and this could have been any of those precious, golden moments he'd spent with Ludwig. It was familiar, it was eternal, and it was a new beginning. He'd felt this before, but now there was no one to stop them and no war to break them apart. Everything merged, joined, defined into a joyful uncontainable realisation, like nothing Feliciano could have ever imagined. It burst through his mind and his head and his body, like an explosion of light, and Feliciano laughed and shouted. "I'm here with you!"

Ludwig laughed, pulled Feliciano close, and with their arms around each other and their tears mingling on their cheeks, Ludwig finally pressed his lips to Feliciano's. Everything fell into place, complete. Ludwig's lips were soft against his, strong and close and right. Ludwig's arms were firm around him, and it was perfect. Because this was Ludwig. And even if he was broken, he was beautiful.

Feliciano's entire life had existed only to lead him to this moment, to Ludwig, to this single embrace. It was the same as that first kiss under the oak tree, as that perfect kiss in the rain; the same as those shattering kisses in a barn beside a fire, as that last devastating embrace on a silent Italian road. The same joy, the same completion, the same perfection - all of it.

Except that this time, they did not have to say goodbye.

The End.

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(almost…)

Chapter 17

Ludwig lay beside Feliciano, his scarred, calloused hands entwined with warm, soft fingers, his unwavering gaze locked with shining gold eyes. The morning sun had long since turned to afternoon, streaming through the billowing bedroom curtain and painting lines of light onto the bedcovers beneath them. Feliciano's auburn hair glinted gold on the pillow. Ludwig could not tear his gaze away; could not stop himself from constantly reaching out to touch Feliciano, to bring him closer. Gently twisting that one curl that still refused to lie flat, lightly tracing those lips that still smiled so readily, running his hand carefully, reverently, over Feliciano's shoulder and down his side. Here, finally, was the one thing Ludwig had lived for: the one reason he had survived. The one memory that had kept him alive through four years of pain and horror and utter hopelessness. His bright, precious, timeless Feliciano. Here, lying beside him, sharing his warmth and his breath and listening intently as Ludwig tried brokenly to speak about those four brutal years.

It had been easy enough to tell of the beginning. Being arrested by the military police, charged with treason for aiding the escape of an American prisoner, spared the punishment of death but sentenced to humiliation and disgrace without formality or trial. Being sent to the Eastern Front, to a losing battle which everyone knew was hopeless, with nothing but a barely functioning rifle and an expectation to die. But with the Germans losing ground on all sides, the Russian campaign was already lost. There was no chance of holding the enemy back for long. Ludwig spent mere days in an army unit before its inevitable defeat and his capture by the Russians. And then, as a German prisoner of war, the real hell began.

Ludwig paused and looked down at Feliciano's hands clasped with his. He had never told anyone of those horrific years. Even to his grandfather, he could only manage a few broken sentences at best. And even now, he was determined to spare Feliciano the worst of it.

"It's okay, Ludwig." Feliciano squeezed Ludwig's hand. "You don't need to say anything else, I don't mind, I…"

"No." Ludwig shook his head and took a deep breath. "I need to." Yes, he needed to say this, and there was only one person he could say it to. But when Feliciano smiled like that, and nodded understandingly, and looked at him with such innocent eyes, Ludwig knew he did not need to hear all of it. Feliciano did not need to hear that the marks on Ludwig's wrists were from the chains he wore during the short hours he was not made to work. That he could still see the faces of the frozen corpses, dead men's bodies he was forced to pave over. That the scar on his cheek was from a beating that almost killed him, a beating he received for the crime of reaching a hand to a man who stumbled. Feliciano should never have to know such things. And so, Ludwig spoke carefully.

"We worked. That is it: that is all. Day and night, we worked, building bridges and paving roads through the ice. We starved - there was no food, and the little water we were given was dirty. And we froze. Over time our clothes became nothing but rags." Ludwig shuddered to remember it. The beating, the starvation, the rampant disease – somehow none of it compared to that bitter, tearing, inescapable cold. "Our captors…" Here Ludwig had to stop briefly,

unable to describe it. …*beat us, tortured us; laughed as we bled, shot us for sport*… Ludwig left the sentence unsaid. "They said we deserved it. They said our army did worse to them. Maybe we did – I do not know. The East was not my war."

Ludwig stopped to breathe, to remind himself the horrors he spoke of were now over. The autumn breeze gusted through the open window, lightly buffeting the old model planes that still hung from the ceiling. In the silence, Feliciano brought Ludwig's hand to his lips, then pressed his smooth cheek to the rough, work-hardened skin. A bright, swelling wave of warmth melted the freezing cold, and Ludwig's hand shook slightly at Feliciano's gentle touch. This was why he had survived - why they had both survived. Feliciano said nothing, but his expression was drawn with pain, and Ludwig understood. It took him a moment to go on.

"Every day I looked for a chance to escape. But there was none. The only escape was death. And so many died. Those not strong enough; those who gave up." Sometimes Ludwig thought they were the smart ones. Sometimes, in that frozen hell, he had envied them. "But I knew I could not give up. There was only one reason I didn't. In the end I lost everything, forgot everything, had nothing left but that one reason to keep going."

"What?" asked Feliciano breathlessly. "What was the reason?"

Ludwig blinked silently, then almost laughed. Only Feliciano would ask when the answer was so obvious. Ludwig tucked a stray lock of hair behind Feliciano's ear. "You, Feliciano."

Feliciano breathed a quiet sigh, his lips turning in a small, sad smile. "Oh."

"I would not let myself die, as long as I knew you were alive. I made that decision early. And I made it again, many times, every single day. For four years, I refused to die. Until the day I was not given a choice." Ludwig lowered his eyes, his hands again starting to shake. He was unsure if he could remember this without falling apart. But when he felt Feliciano's fingers touch his cheek and trail into his hair, Ludwig remembered that he could be strong. "When new prisoners stopped arriving, and there were too few of us to work, we were no longer needed. We were taken into the forest. And we were told to walk. I knew then that I had reached the end. And so I walked – I had no choice. Eleven steps… or was it twelve?" Ludwig furrowed his brow, his eyes drifting. "I counted, but I… I don't…" *The ice through his boots, the snow in his eyes; his blood in his ears, his breath misting before him*… "I don't remember…"

"It doesn't matter." Feliciano pressed a kiss to Ludwig's shoulder and brought him back to this sunny room. "It doesn't matter how many."

"No." Ludwig tried to focus on this room: on the light from the window, the sound of Feliciano's breathing, the brightness of his eyes. "But with each one, I remembered. I remembered you. Every word you spoke to me. Every smile you gave me. The sound of your laughter… the sound of your tears. I could not pray; I could not hope." *Every step in the snow, every blast of gunfire, every man who fell dead to the forest floor*… "I could only remember. The smell of your hair." Ludwig breathed in against Feliciano's hair. "The feel of your skin." He ran his fingers down Feliciano's wet cheek. "Every touch. Every moment. Of my entire life, all I could remember were the moments I had spent with you. And I was not

afraid to die." Feliciano breathed a shaky gasp. Ludwig's focus again started to drift. "I heard the gunshot, but I was on the ground before I felt it."

This time Feliciano choked on a sob, his hands clinging almost painfully to Ludwig's arms. The tears on his cheeks glistened in the afternoon sunlight. Ludwig's heart wrenched at his chest, and he gently brushed them away.

"I am sorry. I will stop."

"No, don't." Feliciano shook his head determinedly, his eyes wide and insistent. "Tell me, Ludwig. I want to hear. And I know it's important, I know you have to tell me, because you only ever talk when you have something important to say."

Ludwig knew now why he could tell this to no one else. No one had ever understood him quite so easily as this little Italian. Ludwig had to kiss Feliciano's forehead before he could continue. "I knew the shot was too low. I knew it would not kill me - not immediately. But the Russians did not fire again. Instead, they left. And I lay in the snow, alone, waiting to die."

"But you didn't." Feliciano spoke as though to reassure himself. "You didn't die, Ludwig, because you are here with me."

Ludwig felt his lips twitch and his chest ache. "No, Feliciano. I didn't die."

"How, then? How did you come back to me?"

Ludwig looked down at his hands. The memories were so real; so cold. "I do not recall how long I lay there. It was until a layer of snow was upon me and I no longer felt the cold. I was holding your photograph, because I wanted…" Ludwig's voice broke away, his throat going tight. "I wanted the last thing I ever saw to be your smiling face."

Feliciano's eyes darkened, his lips parting in breathless wonder. "My photograph…"

"I kept it hidden in my boot. The flower you gave me, though…" Ludwig felt sick to remember the moment a Russian soldier had torn the dried little daisy from his hand and ripped it to pieces. "I am sorry. I lost it." Ludwig swallowed through his tight throat and continued quickly. "But I kept your photograph. And as I lay there in there in the snow, staring at the picture, at your face, just as the world began to turn white… a gloved hand reached out and touched mine."

Feliciano gasped, his eyes widening further. "Who was it?"

"It was a lady." Ludwig said it incredulously, because even now, it was a hard thing to believe. "A lady dressed in blue, with short blonde hair and tears on her cheeks, who spoke at first in Russian. I barely understood. She spoke no German, but she did speak English, and she told me she would help me. Which she did."

Again, Ludwig did not need to tell all of it. But that was because he did not recall much. He did, however, recall waking in a large fire-lit room, in a wide, soft bed, warm for the first

time in years. He recalled trying to move, and the gutting wave of excruciating fear when he realised he could not feel his legs. He recalled shouting, frantic, demanding to know where he was and why any Russian would help a German like him. And he recalled that gentle hand brushing his sweaty hair from his face; the sadness in those kind blue eyes; that soft, calm voice telling him he was safe, that he would be all right, that he reminded her of a brother she once loved, a lifetime ago, before revolution and war turned him into someone she no longer recognised.

Feliciano let Ludwig remember in silence before asking finally, "Where did she come from?"

"She lived on an old farmland estate, near where we were working, in the west close to Ukraine. She liked to walk in the woods, which is where she found me." Ludwig again recalled the older lady's words, spoken by his bedside after yet another visit from the team of well-paid Russian doctors: *I have failed many people in my life. My brother, my sister, and the innocent lives destroyed by them both. I have waited many years to redeem myself.* He might simply have been her chance for redemption, but as long as he lived, Ludwig would never forget the kind, blue eyes of his saviour. "She contacted my grandfather, and when I was well enough she paid for my transport to Berlin."

"What a nice lady," said Feliciano simply. Ludwig's condensed version of events seemed to be enough for him.

"Yes. An angel."

Feliciano smiled at that, running his thumb in circles over Ludwig's arm. "Your own angel, just like Gilbert was for Roderich, and Roderich for me; and Lovino for Antonio, and like you were for Alfred. If only everyone had an angel like that." Feliciano shook his head, his smile turning to a frown. His cheeks were slightly red, and still a little wet. "How can some people do such wonderfully kind things in this world, but others be so awful? It makes no sense, Ludwig. I don't understand it."

Ludwig glanced up, blinking, and watched the model planes circling in the breeze. He knew, beyond any doubt, that he would never know anyone in the world with such a beautiful view on it as Feliciano. "War is nothing but hate. It makes men animals. But love keeps us human."

A long silence fell, broken only by their quiet breathing and the occasional bird call drifting through the window. Feliciano seemed like he wanted to say something, and eventually his eyes lowered and his hand stilled. "I missed you so much, Ludwig."

"I know." So much... Feliciano would never know how much. But that was over, and this was now, and it was forever.

"I'm sorry." Feliciano sounded suddenly uncertain. "I wish... I mean, I don't..."

Ludwig ran a hand down Feliciano's back and drew him closer. "There is nothing you need to say, Feliciano. Thank you for listening."

"Thank you for coming home." Feliciano nestled against Ludwig's chest, and though he could not feel them, Ludwig knew Feliciano's legs were tangled with his. But he could feel

Feliciano's warm breath on his neck as he whispered softly. *"Ich liebe dich,* Ludwig."

Ludwig touched his lips to Feliciano's ear and whispered back. *"Ti amo,* Feliciano. Forever."

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The next morning, Feliciano woke in Ludwig's arms for the very first time. Birds sang outside the window, muted sunlight broke through the curtains, and Ludwig's chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm against Feliciano's cheek. An indescribable, inescapable feeling of warmth and wonder and light, floating joy welled within him. It was like every tear was forgotten, every heartache dissolved. Feliciano reached up and touched Ludwig's cheek, watched as his eyelids fluttered and those blue eyes opened. Ludwig blinked a few times, then his eyes lit up with a gentle smile. "Feliciano."

Feliciano's heart sent fluttering waves across his skin. "Ludwig." His stomach rumbled. "I'm hungry. Do you have pasta in Germany?"

"Germany?" Ludwig stared blankly for a few moments, then looked around as though reminding himself where he was. Finally he breathed out in understanding, smiled again, and ran a thumb across Feliciano's cheek. "Yes. But not for breakfast. Tell me - do you still like chocolate?"

Feliciano gasped loudly and shot upright. "Chocolate for breakfast? Really, Ludwig? Oh my gosh! Germany is wonderful!"

The entire day, Feliciano felt like he was flying. As he and Ludwig had chocolate and coffee in the sunny little kitchen, stealing glances and talking of nothing and occasionally forgetting what they were doing as they just looked at each other. As Ludwig explained how his shiny black chair worked, turning the wheels and moving the armrests and finally giving in and letting Feliciano sit on his lap as he raced down the hallway. As they headed into the garden and wandered through the beautiful, open-air, bird-filled aviary that Gilbert had built years ago. It was wondrous how naturally right and breathtakingly perfect it felt to be with Ludwig again. Feliciano had never felt such easy, natural happiness in his life.

But now, in the wide, green backyard, standing at a distance as Ludwig sat surrounded by three jumping, barking, enormous dogs, Feliciano was starting to feel a little uncertain. Ludwig threw the ball again across the lawn, looking over at Feliciano as the three dogs chased gleefully after it. "They are friendly, Feliciano. Come and say hello."

Feliciano clung to the porch railing and gave a little wave. "Hello, puppies. Can I go inside now?"

Ludwig gave a short laugh. It was the same deep laugh that Feliciano remembered so well, yet it sounded like Ludwig was not used to it. "They will not hurt you."

Feliciano looked uncertainly at the three dogs chasing each other across the grass. One gold, one brown, one black, and all still jumping, barking, and enormous. The gold one reached the ball first, bounding back across the yard to bring it to Ludwig. The others were a little slower behind.

"They are old now," said Ludwig, taking the ball from the gold dog and ruffling its coat. He looked sad suddenly. "I have been gone so long, I have missed most of their lives. But they still have a few years left." Ludwig stroked the dog's long ears, speaking to it in German.

Feliciano felt a flaring glow beneath his skin. His wonderful, kind Ludwig was just as good and gentle as Feliciano always remembered him. Feliciano watched as the dogs crowded around Ludwig, tongues lolling and tails wagging, barely even noticing Feliciano where he stood. Maybe they weren't quite so scary after all. And if they could make Ludwig smile like that… "He looks nice," said Feliciano hesitantly. "The gold one looks nice."

Ludwig smiled over at him, and Feliciano's heart turned in his chest. Anything was worth it to see that smile. "This is Aster. He was only a puppy when I left home. He is very gentle - all he wants to do is play."

Feliciano forced himself to take a single cautious step onto the grass, nervously eyeing the enormous black dog nearby. "All right, I'll pat Aster. Aster doesn't look as mean as the fluffy brown one, or that big black one."

"The fluffy brown one is Blackie." Blackie tried to push Aster out of the way, and Ludwig pushed the dog back playfully. "And she isn't mean. Just a bit jealous, sometimes."

Feliciano took another step closer, biting his lip when Blackie jumped up and placed her huge front paws on Ludwig's chest. "Why is the brown puppy called Blackie?"

"I found her abandoned in an old factory, when I was eighteen or so." Ludwig placed Blackie's legs firmly back on the ground. "She was so tiny, hiding in the fireplace, and completely black with soot. So I called her Blackie, and I brought her home."

Feliciano gasped, horrified, and again walked closer. "In the fireplace? Poor little Blackie! Okay, I'll pat Blackie. But the big black one is still too scary."

"This is Berlitz," said Ludwig when the black dog reached him finally. It had taken him a long time to run back across the grass. "He's not scary at all. Yes, he is big, and has a loud bark, and he is a little shy of strangers - but he is simply caring and loyal, and he would never hurt anyone. He is very old now, and he went deaf in the bombings."

Feliciano put a hand to his chest and felt his lip tremble. No wonder poor Berlitz was so slow… "He's deaf? Oh, puppy! I think I'll pat Berlitz."

Ludwig laughed again, sending Feliciano's heart soaring. He reached out his hand and gave a small tilt of the head. "Come on, then."

Feliciano looked at Ludwig's outstretched hand, at his smiling face, then laughed brightly. How could he possibly be afraid of something so silly? He hurried to Ludwig's side, sat on his lap, and the three dogs immediately jostled for his attention. Feliciano reached his hand out to Berlitz, who carefully nuzzled his palm, furry and wet.

Ludwig put his arms around Feliciano's waist and pulled him close. "They like you." He sounded pleased.

Feliciano nodded happily, his silly fear completely gone. As the three fluffy dogs crowded around them, noses sniffing in curiosity and tails wagging in delight, Feliciano wondered how he had ever thought them scary. He took the ball from Ludwig's hand and threw it across the yard. Aster and Blackie chased after it, but Berlitz just rested his head on Feliciano's knee.

Ludwig's hand joined Feliciano's. "I told you he wasn't scary."

Feliciano sighed with happiness and kissed the top of Ludwig's head. "We should get a kitty."

Ludwig just laughed.

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Feliciano and Ludwig spent the autumn in Germany. The little forest-bordered village truly was everything Ludwig had once said it was, amongst those hill-top church ruins in Italy. It was warm, and it was friendly, and it really did feel like home. They spent most days outside, whether in the village streets or the surrounding fields, in the brisk air and the filtered sunshine. Ludwig was usually determined in pushing his wheelchair himself, but just sometimes he would let Feliciano push him slowly along the cobblestoned streets, past pretty shops and peaked-roofed houses and neat, well-trimmed gardens. A few times Feliciano thought he might have liked to climb to the big white castle, but it was up all those stairs, and he didn't want to go without Ludwig, and it probably wasn't all that interesting anyway.

And so, the autumn days passed like a dream. But rather than the numb, nightmarish, waking sleep Feliciano had grown accustomed to since the war, this dream was beautiful, and he never wanted to wake up. Feliciano was amazed at how easily he fit into this strange new life in Germany. Ludwig's grandfather was serious, but kind – he was not nearly so scary as he appeared at first. He showed Feliciano his old war medals, sometimes helped him with his German, and even let Feliciano call him Opa Aldrich, though he did seem a bit surprised by that at first. To Feliciano's great delight, Roderich stayed with them over the autumn. In the evenings, after Feliciano and Ludwig's long walks, they would all drink a spicy wine called gluehwein while Roderich played the piano. He taught Feliciano many wonderful songs, about dreams and tomorrows and lamplights, but Feliciano's favourite to sing was his and Ludwig's 'Auf Wiedersehen.' The glorious autumn days passed in unending wonder and happiness until before he knew it, it was almost winter.

The day before Feliciano and Ludwig returned to Italy they spent the afternoon in the local beer hall. Feliciano had been here a few times now, but he was still surprised at how different it was from the cantinas back home. Long, wooden benches ran alongside carved, heavy tables, stained glass windows adorned the old brick walls, and there was even a big elk head mounted above the fireplace, though Ludwig had assured Feliciano it wasn't real. Waitresses with plaited hair and pretty dresses carried dozens of beer glasses between the tables, and a band played on a stage in the corner, the musicians wearing suspenders and funny hats and playing big shiny instruments.

The only thing that bothered Feliciano about the place was that he did not actually like beer. But this was a beer hall, after all, and that was what Ludwig and Roderich and Opa Aldrich always ordered. They were already halfway through theirs, so Feliciano hesitantly took a sip

from his mug, and immediately made a face. Ludwig seemed to be fighting back a smile. "You can order something else, Feliciano."

Feliciano peered at him sideways. "But this is a beer hall."

Ludwig's eyes crinkled and he briefly placed a balled-up hand to his lips. "Yes, but as I have told you before, you do not have to drink beer."

"But…" Feliciano glanced furtively around the hall. The four of them sat at the end of a long table by the wall, their usual spot, to make room for Ludwig's chair. From here, it certainly *looked* like beer was compulsory - every person in sight was drinking the frothy amber liquid from big, heavy beer mugs. "Are you sure?"

Ludwig nodded. "Quite sure. There is cider, or schnapps, or wine…"

"Oh, I don't know if I should drink wine in a beer hall, Ludwig. That wouldn't be very polite. Besides, Lovino says that I get really annoying when I drink wine, and I usually start singing, and I don't think those musicians in the funny hats would like that." Feliciano leant forward and whispered. "Someone should tell them you're supposed to smile when you play music. Ooh!" Feliciano sat back and motioned to a waitress as she passed, carrying a wide tray laden with food. "Bretzels! *Danke, Fräulein.* I'm going to miss these when we go home to Italy, although I am looking forward to having proper pasta again. You Germans never make the sauce right, and really, you don't have to have cabbage with *everything.* But I can't wait to tell Lovino about chocolate for breakfast, he probably won't believe me though… ooh, peanuts..."

Roderich shot Ludwig an amused glance, laughing quietly as Feliciano grabbed handfuls of food from the bemused waitress's tray. "It will be very odd without you around, Feli."

Aldrich shook his head with a familiar expression of bewilderment and faint amusement. "It will certainly be... quieter." He nodded at the waitress as she left, and she flashed him a brilliant smile. Opa Aldrich was just as popular with the local girls here as Grandpa Roma always was at home.

"Oh, but we won't be gone forever," said Feliciano earnestly. He and Ludwig had decided to divide their time between Italy and Germany. It was simply growing too cold here at the moment, and Ludwig hated the cold now. "We will come back for the summer, won't we, Ludwig?"

Ludwig did not reply, but he nodded, and his hand reached for Feliciano's under the table. Feliciano took it and offered him a bretzel with his free hand. Ludwig shook his head, refusing silently, though laughter shone from his deep blue eyes. He was often silent these days, but that was okay. Ludwig did not need to speak for Feliciano to know that he shared this same unfading contentment.

"You are like two little birds," said Roderich, smiling softly as he concentrated on cleaning his glasses. "Flying south for the winter."

"Unlike you, Roderich," said Aldrich, leaning forward and filling his mug from the big beer jug on the table. "This German winter won't be nearly as cold as where you're going. I still

don't know why you will not wait until spring." Feliciano knew that Aldrich was not looking forward to being alone again. He had already expressed his disappointment at Ludwig leaving for Italy, and it was obvious he looked on both Roderich and Feliciano as his own grandsons. Feliciano only wished that Grandpa Roma could one day feel the same about Ludwig.

Roderich shrugged apologetically. "I have already waited too long to attend to this matter. I should have left months ago."

"Will you visit us in Italy when you are finished?" asked Feliciano eagerly. "And will you bring me a present? What do they have in Finland, anyway?"

"Vodka?" Aldrich suggested lightly.

Feliciano's lip curled in distaste. "Oh, don't bring me vodka, Roderich. I think I'd almost prefer beer."

Roderich smiled as he set his glasses back in place. "I am sure I will find you something, Feli. And I would be happy to visit you. Perhaps you could even join me, Aldrich."

Feliciano turned to Aldrich pleadingly. "Oh, yes! And then you can meet Grandpa Roma, and Lovino, and Antonio..."

"Antonio," Aldrich repeated thoughtfully, tapping his beer mug. "That is Gilbert's Spanish friend, yes? The one who laughs so much. He used to send you model planes, Ludwig."

Ludwig nodded. "Yes. I am looking forward to seeing him again."

Feliciano threw his hand up and laughed. "Of course, I forgot you would know him already. Isn't it funny how everyone seems to know each other? It is a small world, that's what Grandpa Roma says. I think you would be friends with my grandpa, Opa Aldrich. Have you ever been to Italy before?"

Aldrich looked down into his beer, his expression suddenly strangely blank. "Not for many years, Feliciano. I fought in the north-east, on the Isonzo River, during the Great War."

"Isonzo?" Feliciano slammed his hand on the table and leant forward in surprise. He had heard the name many times, both from admiring strangers and Grandpa Roma's own war stories. He was Maggiore Vargas, after all, hero of the Isonzo campaign. "My grandpa fought at Isonzo! He was the youngest Major in the Italian army, you know." Feliciano gasped, his eyes going wide. Grandpa Roma had been in the Italian army; Opa Aldrich in the German. They had been enemies. "Oh my gosh… do you think you might have fought each other?"

Aldrich paused, frozen, his knuckles turning white as he clutched his beer mug. It took him a few moments to stutter disbelievingly, "Major Vargas. Your grandfather isn't... Augustus Vargas?"

Feliciano felt Ludwig's hand grip just a little tighter to his. "So you did know him! Wow! It really is a small world! But no one calls him Augustus anymore, he punched the last person

who did that."

Roderich looked almost as shocked as Aldrich. "You must have commanded on opposing sides of the battle," he said incredulously. "How extraordinary!"

Aldrich did not respond, still silent and staring at nothing. The others waited, silently, until eventually Ludwig spoke softly. *"Grosvater?"*

Aldrich shook his head slightly then took a long sip of beer as though to steady himself. "I knew him only briefly, Feliciano. I suppose it would be more accurate to say I knew *of* him. He was a fierce enemy, as well as the most honourable I ever fought." Aldrich looked from Ludwig to Feliciano and let out a short bark of laughter. "Major Vargas' grandson. *Mein Gott,* I need more beer."

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Feliciano's heart raced and his entire body seemed to soar, thrilled to return to blue, pleasant Italian skies from the deep German cold. The train ride with Ludwig was far more pleasant than the first endless one without him, but Feliciano was still relieved to be outside again: in the still afternoon sunshine, on this well worn village road, among familiar sights and scents and trilling birdcalls. Ludwig took longer than usual to negotiate his chair over the country trail, but it was nice to go slowly. Feliciano couldn't help running into the fields and back, throwing out his arms and laughing in the gentle wind. Germany was wonderful, but it was so good to be home.

Further down the road, at the old broken-down tank, Ludwig stopped for a moment to flex his hands. "Look, Ludwig," Feliciano cried as he ran back towards him. "The lavender is still blooming!"

"That's good," Ludwig replied, a tiny reflective smile on his lips. "I could do with a short winter." He sighed softly, looking around and shaking his head in wonder. "Incredible," he said quietly. "It is exactly as I remember it. This tank is even still here."

The big iron machine was rusted over now, tall grass and long tendrils and colourful weeds all creeping up the sides. It had been on the side of this road for so long Feliciano barely noticed it anymore. "I suppose they must have forgotten it was here – it has been here since the war started, and no one ever came back for it."

"It is an old Panzer 1, a 1937 model."

"Oh. Is it?" Feliciano did not know anything about that. He pointed to the tangle of colourful weeds growing over its surface. "Look - there are flowers in it. It's much prettier now, don't you think? And oh!" In the cluster of weed-encircled flowers Feliciano spotted a single bright, red daisy. He reached up and picked it carefully, dusted it off, and pressed it into Ludwig's hand. "Here, Ludwig, that's for the one you lost in Russia."

Ludwig stared at the flower silently. After a few moments he turned his head and blinked very fast. "Thank you," he said finally, turning his gaze back to Feliciano, his thoughts unfathomable behind eyes as blue as the clear, cloudless sky. Feliciano felt his breath catch in

his throat – after all this time, those blue eyes were exactly the same. And this was almost the exact place Feliciano had first lost himself in them.

"Come on, Ludwig." Feliciano forced himself to speak, but felt like he was breaking a spell in doing so. "Just up here."

They both knew their destination: there was no need to speak it. A little further down the road, around a small bend in the path, the familiar field rose like a sea of green and gold. And against the background of the mountains, tall and strong and eternal, stood their oak tree; their somewhere else. Feliciano's heart leapt, his blood fired, and he again raced ahead, the once-wild yellow grass barely brushing his ankles as he ran. All these years he had waited here alone, and now, finally, he was here again with Ludwig. Laughter rose in his chest and his head turned light. It was too perfectly wonderful to be true. When Feliciano reached the tree he spun around to call out, but instead he went still, the words dying on his lips. Ludwig did not move to follow. He just watched, unmoving, his eyes fixed on Feliciano and his lips turned in a small, thoughtful smile.

A sudden breeze shook the leaves overhead and a fleeting memory flashed before Feliciano's eyes. An image of Ludwig in his tailored grey officer's uniform, head high and shoulders straight, striding boldly across the field with the sun setting behind him. Just as quickly, the image was gone. But what was left was so breathtakingly perfect, Feliciano felt his heart turn and his breath stop. It was never Ludwig's fancy uniform, or his handsome face, or his tall, easy strength. It was his kindness, his loyalty; it was the way he made Feliciano feel accepted, and respected, and safe. That was why Feliciano loved him. That was why he barely even noticed the shiny black wheelchair. Because it was never about Ludwig's looks; never about his abilities. Even if he was changed, this was the same Ludwig as that pilot in the officer's uniform, and this was still their somewhere else, and Feliciano had never loved him more. He stood waiting, his breath fast and his skin tingling, as Ludwig moved slowly across the field. When he finally reached him, Ludwig took Feliciano's hand and smiled. *"Buon giorno, bello."*

The words turned Feliciano's knees weak. The wind whipped his hair and he laughed brightly, joyfully, uncontrollably. *"Guten Tag, sweetheart!"* Feliciano fell onto Ludwig's lap, threw his arms around his neck, and felt Ludwig's strong, safe arms surround him. Their lips met easily, perfectly; elated laughter rising between them. There would be no more goodbyes here.

Five times Feliciano had kissed Ludwig in this field. He knew, beyond any doubt, that he would kiss him many more. But Feliciano also knew that none would ever be as freeing, as wondrous, as beautifully perfect as this simple hello kiss, on this beautiful Italian winter afternoon, somewhere else underneath their oak tree.

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It was growing late by the time they headed up the little lane to the farmhouse. He had run up this path thousands of times, with the sun low in the sky and the stars already sparkling. But this time, with the lights on ahead and Ludwig by his side, Feliciano truly felt like he was coming home. And in the fading light, Feliciano could just make out his brother already standing in the doorway.

"Lovino!" Feliciano ran the rest of the way, laughing as he fell into Lovino's waiting arms.

"Slow down, Feli!" Lovino clasped Feliciano close, his embrace warm and familiar and *home*. "You'll fall and hurt yourself."

"No I won't, don't be silly. Have you been waiting long? Where's Antonio? Where's Grandpa?" Feliciano took a step back, smiling broadly. "Oh, I can't wait to tell you everything, and I hope no one's upset we arrived so late, but it was a lovely afternoon for a walk, and with Ludwig's…" Feliciano immediately broke off. He realised, with a guilty stab to the stomach, that he had forgotten to mention Ludwig's wheelchair in the short letters he had sent home. "I, um…" Lovino just stared straight past him, wide-eyed, and Feliciano turned to see Ludwig approach the doorstep.

"Hello, Lovino."

Lovino bit his lip, folded his arms, and glanced down at his feet. He looked like he did not know what to say: but then, Lovino often did not know what to say. Feliciano wasn't sure whether to reassure his brother or Ludwig, but just before the silence became uncomfortable, it was thankfully broken by a familiar voice.

"Who is that I hear on the doorstep?" Antonio took a few moments to step through the doorway – he walked slowly these days. When he noticed Ludwig's chair he turned his head sharply, a painful expression crossing his face. He took a single deep breath, as though feeling and understanding and accepting. Then the expression was gone, and he grinned instead. "Little Ludwig. It's been a long time."

Ludwig almost flinched when he noticed Antonio's missing arm. Feliciano mentally kicked himself: another thing he had forgotten to mention. But Ludwig recovered as quickly as Antonio, and it was obvious he was glad to see his brother's old friend again. "Ten or so years, I believe. It is good to see you, Antonio."

Antonio leant down and embraced Ludwig warmly. "You Beilschmidts are indestructible."

Ludwig's voice was rough when he responded, his arms around Antonio's shoulders. "I wish that were so."

Antonio squeezed Ludwig's shoulder, stood upright, and for a moment he and Ludwig regarded each other silently. Feliciano could almost see the memories playing behind their eyes. Then Antonio laughed. "But good Lord, little Ludwig, you got so *big!"* He quickly turned to Feliciano, blinking rapidly. "And Feli! Give me a hug! Uh-oh, I think all that German cuisine has made you fat…"

Feliciano gasped indignantly as Antonio threw an arm over his shoulder. "It's not my fault! They have chocolate for breakfast!"

That got Lovino's attention. "Chocolate for breakfast?"

"But of course!" cried Antonio. "No German breakfast is complete without a block of chocolate, a barrel of beer, and an entire roasted pig!"

"Only on special occasions," said Ludwig, the corner of his lip turned in a tiny smirk.

Antonio placed a hand to his chest and gasped loudly. "Was that a *joke,* Ludwig Beilschmidt?! Goodness, what has Feli done to you?" Antonio laughed and shook his head in amazement. "But there is so much to ask! How is your grandfather? And Roderich? You have met my Lovino, of course. I apologise if he seemed rude, he doesn't mean it..."

"Don't apologise for me, bastard!"

Antonio giggled. "He doesn't mean that, either."

Feliciano had to choke back the overwhelming emotion rising in his throat. He had never dared to imagine, never even thought to hope that one day he would be standing at this door with Ludwig; that they would be coming home together. Antonio was so happy and accepting, and Lovino would learn to understand. The only thing that worried Feliciano was Grandpa Roma's reaction. What if he was still angry? What if he would not speak to Ludwig? What if he even told him to go away? Feliciano's thoughts started to run away from him. Yes, Grandpa Roma had let him go to Germany, but what if he had changed his mind? What if Feliciano had to choose between Ludwig and his family? He had made that choice once before, and knew he could not handle that pain again. But what if...

"Ah, you've arrived finally."

Feliciano almost jumped, his heart flying to his throat when he realised Grandpa Roma was standing in the doorway. Antonio stepped out of the way and Ludwig nodded politely, though his hands gripped his armrests firmly. "Major Vargas."

"Lieutenant Beilschmidt." Grandpa Roma stood straight and tall, his expression fixed and unfathomable. There was a silent, seemingly endless moment where the two men simply looked at each other. Finally, Roma lowered his eyes and inclined his head. "But let us not use old military titles here." Then, to Feliciano's complete shock, Grandpa Roma leant down and hugged Ludwig. "Welcome home, Ludwig."

Ludwig looked completely stunned. Eventually he patted Roma's shoulder awkwardly. "Uh... *Grazie, Signore."*

Feliciano promptly burst into tears.

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The next morning was colder, the breeze carrying a slight chill as Feliciano walked the freshly tilled fields with Ludwig. It was still early morning, the sun barely risen above the mountains and glistening dew still clinging to the grass. But Grandpa Roma had said the lilies were blooming in the northern fields, and daybreak was always the best time to pick flowers, and besides, it was a far too beautiful morning to waste. At first Feliciano worried the long walk would be too rocky for Ludwig's chair, but Ludwig handled it so easily, and his arms were strong enough to push past the rough patches. Feliciano looked up at the sun rising, turning the sky orange along the horizon. "I can't believe Grandpa and Lovino and Antonio would rather sleep than see this pretty sky."

Ludwig snorted softly. "Well, we did only go to bed three hours ago."

Feliciano shrugged. "That is no excuse, Ludwig. You and I are here, aren't we?"

"Yes, but I prefer it with just you and I."

Funny, how such simple words from Ludwig could still stop Feliciano's breath and make his chest flutter. He brushed back his windswept hair and focused on kicking a rock through the grass. "Me too, Ludwig. But it was a lovely night, wasn't it?"

Ludwig nodded, though he looked a bit incredulous. "Surprisingly. Lovely, and… strange."

In fact, it had been a lovely, strange, surreal, and yet perfectly wonderful evening. With the fire burning and the smell of coffee in the air, the five of them spoke of trains, and Ludwig's village, and music, and Shakespeare, and anything but war. Antonio told old stories about Gilbert and Ludwig that made everyone laugh, even Lovino. And Feliciano had fallen asleep on Ludwig's shoulder, blissful and content. He loved Ludwig's village, but it was wonderful to be home with his family - his Italian family. Feliciano supposed he had two families now.

"I think Grandpa Roma was very happy to hear that you are Opa Aldrich's grandson, even if he did spit his drink all over the place. But I laughed when he said you look exactly alike. You don't look alike at all! Your hair is much shorter, after all." Feliciano reached up to a tree branch as they passed, plucking a green leaf and twirling it between his fingers. "And you smile more."

"I do?" Ludwig sounded rather surprised at that.

"Of course. Opa Aldrich never smiles, he always just looks a bit surprised."

Ludwig let out a short, heavy breath. "Only around you."

Feliciano tilted his head inquiringly. "Am I so surprising?"

"Constantly, Feliciano." But Ludwig said it kindly, and Feliciano knew he meant it as a good thing. Feliciano reached up for another leaf as they passed the next tree.

"Well, that's okay, I suppose. Things surprise me all the time. I'm actually surprised right now. I mean, Grandpa Roma said there were lilies blooming on the north side of the field, but I don't see any lilies, I only see these trees and the grass and some daisies and that cottage over there…" Feliciano broke off abruptly, furrowing his brow and putting his hand above his eyes to peer across the grass. There, on the edge of the field, was the old barn that lived, both sweetly and bitterly, in Feliciano's memory. Only it wasn't the same. It was much larger now, with a colourful, fenced garden and wide windows and a bright green front door. It wasn't a barn anymore – it was a little cottage. Feliciano stopped still, the leaves falling forgotten from his fingers. He was completely astonished. "What… what happened?"

"Is that…" Ludwig stopped, turned his head, glanced around, then breathed out in understanding. "When was it turned into a house?"

Feliciano shook his head, staring, stunned and confused. "I don't know. Maybe someone bought it, or… I don't know."

"It was not like this when you left for Germany?"

"No! It was just a barn! Well, not *just* a barn, I mean… I…" Feliciano again broke off, those sweet and bitter memories flooding his mind. That one night during the war with Ludwig, in a hay loft by a fireplace, under a rain-pelted roof. That blazing night of closeness and bliss and completeness; that one time Feliciano had joined so perfectly with Ludwig. Beyond the shock and confusion of why this place had changed so drastically, Feliciano suddenly realised one thing: how much he wanted that again. "Ludwig, do you remember…"

Ludwig answered before Feliciano could finish. "Yes."

The cold wind gusted strongly, whipping Feliciano's hair against his cheek. He twisted his fingers, took a deep breath, then asked, "Do you think we could ever do that again?"

This time Ludwig took too long to answer. He looked away when he spoke. "I don't know."

Feliciano nodded, breathed, and smiled. "Let's have a closer look." Feliciano ran ahead to the little cottage, Ludwig following behind. When he reached the evergreen trees that bordered the edge of the wide field, Feliciano turned into the little fenced lane that led to the bright green cottage door. His stomach flipped when he saw there was a note attached to it. "Ludwig!" he called, ripping the note from the door. "There's something…"

You're a grown man, Feli. You can't live with your grandpa forever.

Feliciano was sure his heart stopped when he read the note, scrawled in Grandpa Roma's familiar handwriting. At first he did not understand it, and then he thought he read it wrong, and then he was quite certain he was dreaming. The words blurred on the page and he turned slowly, overwhelmed and speechless, to see Ludwig wheeling down the wide garden-bordered lane. "Feliciano?" Ludwig approached slowly, his expression puzzled and concerned. "What is it?"

Feliciano just shook his head, barely able to believe it. "It's ours."

Ludwig stopped, furrowing his brow in bewilderment. "It's what?"

Feliciano laughed. Once he started, he could not stop. "It's ours!" he cried again, waving the small white note and racing down the lane. An overwhelming joy overtook him and he could only laugh, and gasp, and throw his arms around Ludwig as he fell onto his lap. Ludwig took the note from his fingers, read the words, then simply held Feliciano in his arms.

Feliciano never knew such happiness existed. He did not understand how he could deserve all this. He simply did not know how to contain such tremendous joy.

This was where he would live with Ludwig. Here in the golden Italian fields; here with the backdrop of their mountains and close to their oak tree. Here, there would finally be a place for them.

The Italian winter passed as quickly and joyfully as the German autumn. Feliciano spent the mornings working in their little garden, planting white lilies and red daisies and bushels of basil and rosemary. Ludwig usually watched him silently, listening as Feliciano talked or sang in the afternoon sunshine. In the afternoons they would sometimes walk to the village, shopping at the market or meeting Antonio and Lovino for coffee in the cantina - on these afternoons they usually ended up at their oak tree, where they would talk and pick flowers and Feliciano would sometimes sing. It was a perfect, beautiful life, and Feliciano knew they deserved it. True, at first some of the villagers had a hard time with a former German officer living amongst them, but by the spring most of them had accepted it. After all, it was rather embarrassing losing a fight to a man in a wheelchair.

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The afternoon thunderstorm broke suddenly, unexpectedly, catching Feliciano and Ludwig unawares as they walked home from the market. By the time they fell through the front door, wet and shaking and breathless, they were completely soaked through. Ludwig shook the rain from his hair and immediately headed for the fireplace in the bedroom. "I will never get used to this Italian weather," he muttered, hearing Feliciano laugh in response as he followed down the hallway behind him.

"At least these spring rainstorms aren't as scary as the ones in winter!" A sudden crack of thunder shook the windows and Feliciano shrieked, his footsteps pounding faster until Ludwig felt gripping arms around his neck. Ludwig stopped, let out a resigned sigh, then turned his chair and pulled Feliciano onto his lap. Feliciano's look of fear turned first to surprise, then to beaming contentment as he leant happily against Ludwig's shoulder. Ludwig rolled his eyes as he continued towards the bedroom. It was ridiculous, really. Feliciano spent almost as much time in this chair as Ludwig himself.

"What have I told you about thunder, Feliciano?"

"Thunder is the sound that lightning makes, not the sound of old Gods fighting each other in the mountains," Feliciano recited dutifully.

"Exactly. Nothing to be afraid of." Ludwig manoeuvred through the wide bedroom door, the dull afternoon light filtering through the curtains and casting shadows on the rug-covered floorboards. He briskly rubbed Feliciano's cold arms before nudging him off his lap. "Now get changed, you're freezing. I'll start the fire."

The old barn's fireplace was now the central point of the bedroom, opposite the dresser and the bed, bordered by a varnished mantelpiece covered with colourful flower vases, framed pictures, and a simple little wooden box containing two very precious photographs. Ludwig set about starting the fire as Feliciano continued talking behind him.

"If thunder is the sound that lightning makes, then why do you see the lightning first?"

"Because light travels faster than sound," Ludwig explained patiently, placing the kindling in the fire.

"It all sounds very strange, Ludwig, but I'm sure you know more about it than I do. And I don't find the thunder so scary anymore, except when I'm not expecting it, but I can't help that. We will have to go back to the market tomorrow, by the way, because I dropped the tomatoes in the rain and I have to make that flan while the basil is still fresh - oh no, do you think the storm will ruin my herbs? I only just planted new ones!"

Ludwig closed the grate on the crackling fire and turned his chair, ready to reassure Feliciano that his herbs would most likely be fine. The words died instantly on his lips. Feliciano stood at the window, naked from the waist up, holding aside the curtain and peering into the front garden. His wet hair clung to his neck, soaked flat but for that single unruly curl, dripping glistening rivulets of water down bare skin that glinted gold in the firelight. He was absolutely beautiful. Ludwig swallowed heavily, his throat turning dry and his breath coming faster. A wave of heat shot down his back, tingling at the base of his spine, spreading to areas he was no longer used to feeling sensation. Feliciano twisted a bare foot on the floor, wiped the water from his forehead, and smiled as he turned.

"I think it will be okay, I suppose I can just replant them if… Ludwig?"

"Feliciano." Ludwig simply reached a hand out for Feliciano, needing him to take it; needing him to understand. Feliciano only stared blankly for a second more. His golden eyes darkened, his soft lips parted, and he breathed a quiet, shaky, "Oh." Then he smiled again, beautiful and calm and trusting. Ludwig's heart turned in his chest, swift and full, as Feliciano raced forward into his arms. Of course he understood.

In only minutes the rain outside grew even heavier, pelting loudly against the roof as the flickering firelight painted Feliciano's skin in a soft golden glow. Laying back on the wide, low bed, Ludwig gazed up at Feliciano straddling his waist; ran his calloused hands over smooth, trembling thighs and warm, firm hips. Feliciano's eyes did not move from Ludwig's, his own hands tracing light circles on Ludwig's chest. Ludwig knew they were both, in some way, scared to try this. After all, they had tried a few times since the winter, and had so far achieved limited success. But he also knew that he trusted Feliciano, and loved him desperately, and Ludwig wanted this as much for his beloved little Italian as he did for himself.

"It's all right, Feliciano." Ludwig reached up to touch Feliciano's cheek, letting his hand fall slowly over uncertain lips and fragile shoulders and that white bullet scar on Feliciano's chest that still pierced Ludwig's heart. "We will go slowly."

A long rumble of thunder echoed through the room. Feliciano's hand gripped Ludwig's firmly, but then he smiled. "There was a thunderstorm the first time, remember?"

Ludwig smiled back. Of course he remembered. He nodded in reply, then said simply, "*Baciami*."

Feliciano's eyes flared at the memory and he leant down into a burning kiss. As he did so, he slowly lifted his hips and lowered himself onto Ludwig. Ludwig breathed a sharp breath of surprise as he felt the dull, tightening pressure, a building shiver, the slow beginnings of sensation. Feliciano moaned softly against his lips and Ludwig kissed him again, his hands resting lightly on those smooth, flexing thighs as Feliciano took his own time adjusting to the

position. "Oh," Feliciano whispered breathily, the blissful, almost surprised tone of his voice sending waves of heat down Ludwig's neck. "Oh, Ludwig…"

Ludwig moved his hands from Feliciano's thighs to his waist, lifting him smoothly and moving him easily. It was different, and it was slightly odd, this instinctive desire to thrust without the ability to do so. But it was also about something else. The quickening drive of Feliciano's hips, the close heat of his breathy sighs, the darkened gaze of his heavy eyes: all blazed through Ludwig's veins and coiled below his hips, building to something like pleasure. This was about being with Feliciano, as close as their bodies allowed; it was about darkening those golden eyes and drawing those sighs from Feliciano's lips.

Feliciano spread his knees, pressed closer, and breathed softly, "Can you feel me, Ludwig?"

"*Ja,* Feliciano." Ludwig tightened his grip, again lifting Feliciano and bringing him down. "I feel you."

The look of pure joy and relief on Feliciano's face melted away any last trace of doubt. Because Ludwig *did* feel him. It was not the same as that first storm-tossed night by this fireplace, and it might never be the same. Yet it was more pure, more real; every radiant glimpse, every touch of Feliciano's perfection drew deeper sensation from Ludwig's broken body. Ludwig lifted a hand to touch Feliciano's cheek, his neck; ran his fingers down the gentle curve of his back; reached across his side and between his thighs. Feliciano cried out, arching up at the touch, and Ludwig felt his breath catch at the sheer golden beauty of him. Ludwig almost lost himself in the rhythm between them, in the consuming sense of unison, until he barely knew where his body ended and Feliciano's began.

By now, Ludwig was used to Feliciano's noise, to his laughter and singing and constant chatter. Yet for these rare moments, Feliciano was silent except for the swift pace of his breathing and his rising sighs that turned to tiny, shaking moans. Ludwig loved Feliciano's noise, and he loved his silence. He loved his wildness and his joy. And when Feliciano's stomach tightened, his cheeks flushed red and his wide eyes locked with Ludwig's own, Ludwig loved that he was the reason for Feliciano's gasping release.

The moment seemed to last both an instant and an eternity, Ludwig's nerves firing with his own steady, unpeaking bliss, until Feliciano's breathing evened and his shaking hands stilled on Ludwig's chest. Ludwig put his hand to the back of Feliciano's neck and drew him down into a deep kiss, enfolding his warm, drowsy body in a steadying embrace. Feliciano's lips were slow and lazy against his, until he broke the kiss with a short, soft laugh. "Oh, Ludwig, um… I, uh, oh."

Ludwig could not help feeling smugly satisfied at that, still blissful that he could make Feliciano feel like this; that he could be the cause of his heavy breaths and tired limbs. For so long Ludwig had been unsure if this union could be possible, and now pure, clear relief flowed through every part of him. Relief that he could still do this for Feliciano. Relief that they still had this; they had each other, and they had everything.

The sound of the forgotten thunder and rain again filled the bedroom as Feliciano fell to Ludwig's side, threw an arm over his chest, and breathed against his neck. Ludwig reached

out for the blankets and tried not to make it obvious as he adjusted his legs beneath the covers. Feliciano just smiled against his skin. "Ludwig?"

"Mm?"

"I'm very happy right now."

Ludwig pulled Feliciano back into his arms and kissed his forehead. "So am I, Feliciano." And he was. Ludwig was quite sure he had never been this happy. Feliciano calmed the dark memories and dulled the sharp pain; he gave life meaning and hope. He was innocence in a world of guilt, a spark of light in what would otherwise be nothing but darkness and confusion. Feliciano was strange, and wild, and Ludwig knew that given fifty years he would never quite understand him. But feeling Feliciano's fingers dance over his chest and hearing his breathing turning to an indistinct humming, Ludwig wondered if that mattered. Because he loved him, and needed him, and he would never stop learning him. And surely that was enough.

Ludwig may have fallen asleep, or he may just have lay drifting, focusing on the perfect feeling of Feliciano in his arms. Either way, he was suddenly startled when Feliciano sat upright and jumped off the bed, pulling a sheet wrapped around his waist with him. Ludwig looked up in bleary confusion. "Where are you going?"

"I have an idea!"

Ludwig decided it was best not to ask any further. He knew by now that there would be no way of talking Feliciano out of it, whatever his sudden mad idea. Instead, Ludwig tried not to laugh as Feliciano stumbled across the room to the fireplace, the sheet twisted awkwardly around his ankles. "You can take the sheet off, Feliciano."

"But then I'll be naked!"

"Exactly."

Feliciano made a sound halfway between a gasp and a guffaw. "Ludwig! Don't be rude. Now, here." Ludwig furrowed his brow when he realised what Feliciano was reaching for. He took the little wooden box from the mantelpiece, clumsily carried it back to the bed, then sat heavily as Ludwig pushed himself up a little against the headboard.

"Feliciano?" Ludwig did not know what else to ask.

Feliciano held the box between them and gazed at Ludwig with earnest eyes. "Ludwig, you said you remembered there was a thunderstorm the first time. Do you also remember how I asked you not to say goodbye?"

Ludwig nodded slowly, his throat suddenly tightening at the memory. He would never forget. "Yes, I remember."

"It always hurt so much to say goodbye to you." Feliciano looked down at the little box, his expression turning sad and uncertain. "Every time I did, I never knew if it would be the last

time, and… and even now, I still don't like saying it, because it reminds me…" Feliciano bit his lip and his eyes started to redden. "And these photographs here, we wrote our goodbyes on them, and… and they're still there…"

Ludwig let out a breath of understanding. Before Feliciano could get too upset, Ludwig gently squeezed his hand. "Pass me my shirt."

Feliciano glanced up, and though he looked a little confused, he nodded and reached for Ludwig's shirt from the table beside the bed. Ludwig took a pen from the front pocket and Feliciano immediately laughed. "You still have a pen in your pocket, Ludwig!"

Ludwig smiled. "You never know when you might need one." He reached for the box and opened it, carefully taking out the crumpled, bloodstained photograph of Feliciano smiling brightly at the camera. This precious piece of Feliciano evoked so many emotions within Ludwig he almost found it hard to look at it. He quickly glanced up at Feliciano's real face, his beautiful smile, before turning the picture over. Resting the photograph on his thigh, Ludwig ran a single line through the words written on the back: *bella ciao.* Then he wrote instead, *buon giorno bello.*

Feliciano stared at the words for a few moments, tears gathering in his eyes. Ludwig reached into the box for the other photograph, then held it out with the pen in a silent suggestion. Feliciano took them both slowly, running a shaking hand over the image before turning it over. He crossed out the scrawled *auf wiedersehen, sweetheart* on the back. Then, beside the old familiar phrase, he carefully wrote the words *guten tag, sweetheart.*

"There," said Ludwig lightly, reaching out and running a thumb under Feliciano's eye. "No more goodbyes."

Feliciano laughed and wiped his eyes. He took a deep breath then let it out slowly, an exhalation of acceptance and relief. Ludwig understood. The last time they had lain under this rain-pelted roof, it had ended in goodbye. Feliciano always remembered so deeply; but Ludwig was determined to always find a way to reassure him.

"Now, here." Ludwig placed the photographs back in the box, placed it on the table beside the bed, and drew Feliciano back into his arms. "Will you do something for me?"

"Yes," Feliciano replied immediately.

Ludwig laughed softly at that. "Promise me you'll wake up beside me, every morning – and never say goodbye."

Ludwig felt Feliciano's lips break into a smile before pressing a warm kiss to his chest. "I promise, Ludwig."

"Good. Now go to sleep."

"Yes, Ludwig."

Ludwig's heart swelled in his chest as Feliciano rested happily, smiling, against his chest. Ludwig still did not know how simply trying to do duty to his country had led him to this strange conclusion. To an odd, startling, beautiful little Italian who had turned the world upside down and changed everything Ludwig ever thought he'd believed in. To a life unlike anything he had ever imagined for himself, and more wonderful than he could have ever dreamt. All Ludwig knew was that despite all the obstacles, despite the years of hell, despite the scars and the pain, he would never change any of it. Ludwig would never regret taking that risk, all those years ago. It had all been worth it.

Ludwig looked over at the photographs sitting beside the bed; those old, painful goodbyes scratched out and replaced with words of greeting. It was time to forget the past – time to live their future. It was time to see where this strange, beautiful, unexpected life would take them. All Ludwig could know for sure, as he held Feliciano close and listened to him drift to sleep, was that it would be together. Because they would never say goodbye again.

The End.

.

(almost...)

Epilogue

Auf wiedersehen, auf wiedersehen, we'll meet again, sweetheart…

Early 1974
Italy

It was a busy, sunny, glorious day in the village. Feliciano strolled the streets with his hands in his pockets, whistling to himself, occasionally tipping his hat and flashing a grin at the pretty girls who passed in the sunlight. Most knew him well and just laughed, shooing him on his way with bright smiles and flippant waves of the hand. But Feliciano was surprised at the amount of unfamiliar faces around town lately. Foreigners in unfamiliar uniforms filled the cantinas, English could be heard on every corner, and here in the town square a big platform had been put up beside a brand new stone memorial. Feliciano had heard there was to be a ceremony of some sort, but he was not sure what all these Americans had to do with it.
He *did* know that it had something to do with the war, so he had not troubled himself to find out more. Feliciano did not like to remember the war. As he walked past a large group clustered around the fountain, he realised that many of the people in the crowd were too young to actually remember it themselves. He shrugged to himself, continuing on his way to meet Ludwig at the old Cantina Rossa beside the square. His heart immediately lightened at the thought.

As he headed towards the edge of square, Feliciano noticed a man standing separate from the crowd, looking both confused and frustrated as he looked all around him. He was wearing a tweed suit and looked a little older than Feliciano, mid-fifties perhaps, with greying blond hair and quite possibly the largest eyebrows Feliciano had ever seen.

"Good day!" said Feliciano cheerfully, walking up to stand in front of the bewildered foreigner. He was not sure about all these Americans, but that was no reason not to help one of them if he could. "Are you all right? Can I help you?"

The man looked a bit panicked at the greeting. "*Non…* oh, bloody hell... *Non Italiano…*"

"Oh, sorry, of course!" Feliciano switched to English. "You're American."

"I beg your pardon?" Now the man looked genuinely affronted. "God no, I'm English."

Feliciano was immediately delighted. "Of course you are! I should have guessed from the suit! Tweed in this weather, my goodness, you English people are wonderful. I bet you quote Shakespeare all the time. Are you lost?"

"What? I…" The Englishman furrowed his brow in confused surprise, then continued to glance around the square as though searching for something. "I'm not lost. *He's* the one who's bloody lost."

Feliciano tried to follow the Englishman's searching gaze, then simply stared back at him. He had always been fascinated by England and the English, so it was a marvellous surprise to meet one unexpectedly in the town square. "Are you on holiday? There are a lot of people visiting Italy, lately. Well, this part of it, anyway."

"I'm here for the ceremony, with my, uh, friend." The man tripped over the word, then quickly tried to hide it. "Yes, my friend, an old friend of mine. He fought here, during the war."

"Oh! My…" Feliciano leant forward and winked, "…*friend* fought here during the war too. Was your *friend* in the British army?"

The Englishman looked completely stunned by that. Feliciano just grinned, until the man attempted an uncertain smile back. "No, he's American. He was a fighter pilot."

Feliciano gasped loudly. "No! Really? So was Ludwig! I'm going to meet him now, come have a drink with us! The cantina is right on the street here, and I'm sure your American will find you better if you stay in one place. My name is Feliciano, what's yours?"

The man fell into step beside Feliciano, though he looked like he wasn't sure how that had happened. "Uh… Arthur. Arthur Kirkland. Pleased to meet you."

"Arthur? Like King Arthur?! I always thought that English stories were the best. Ludwig is German, so his stories are dark and strange and oh, I hope you won't be upset to meet him, even if he is German…"

"The war was years ago." Arthur gave Feliciano another smile. "I have to wonder why we are constantly reminded of it."

Feliciano breathed a sigh of relief, then laughed lightly. "That is good to hear! You seem like a nice fellow, Arthur. Oh! Ludwig!"

Feliciano hurried to where Ludwig sat at the table on the street, a pot of coffee and two mugs on the table before him. Ludwig looked up and smiled, his eyes sparkling blue as always, his hat pulled forward over that little bald spot he hated but which Feliciano thought was cute. "Feliciano."

Feliciano loved the sound of Ludwig saying his name in that deep, unfading German accent. Everyone else called him Feli – everyone but Ludwig. To Ludwig, he had always been Feliciano, and always would be.

"Look, Ludwig, I found an Englishman!"

Arthur looked a little startled at the introduction. Ludwig just nodded politely. "Good afternoon. I hope Feliciano did not scare you, he tends to do that."

Arthur shook his head and let out a short breath of laughter. "Good afternoon. And not at all, I assure you. In fact I am… almost reminded of someone."

Feliciano fell into the chair beside Ludwig and gestured for Arthur to sit opposite. "His name is *Arthur,* Ludwig, can you believe it? Arthur, this is my *friend*, Ludwig." Feliciano winked again before gesturing to a nearby waiter. "Excuse me, young man, could we get some tea please? He's English." Ludwig muttered something that sounded suspiciously like an apology. Arthur looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"So," Feliciano continued, turning back to the table cheerfully. He was always happy to meet someone new, especially someone English. "Have you ever seen so many people gathered in one place?" he asked, gesturing around the busy cantina.

"Actually, yes, but I am from London," explained Arthur, resting his hands lightly on the table. He glanced between Feliciano and Ludwig, like he was trying to study them discreetly. "I suppose everyone is here for the anniversary."

"The anniversary?" Feliciano was still not entirely sure what the celebration was about.

Ludwig passed Feliciano a mug of coffee. "Feliciano, don't you know what today is?"

"Yes, it's Tuesday."

"No…"

"It is too, Ludwig, it's Tuesday, I know because last night we had bolognese and we always have bolognese on Monday so today must be…"

Ludwig interrupted quickly. "It is the thirtieth anniversary of the American landings."

Feliciano paused for a second. "It is?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Thirty years. Feliciano could remember the landings of thirty years ago like it was yesterday. The landings he had told Ludwig about, on that awful winter morning in the rain, betraying the Resistenza by doing so. The landings that had taken Ludwig away from him. That was what everyone was celebrating? Feliciano suddenly felt quite ill. Before he could think how to react, a loud voice interrupted the silence.

"Arthur!" Feliciano looked up to see a blond man in glasses, a military uniform, and a crooked little hat race up to the table and grasp the back of a chair breathlessly. "I think I got lost!"

Arthur managed to scowl and look relieved at the same time. "You did get bloody lost, you fool."

"I can't help it! So much has changed since I was here!" The man turned to Feliciano and Ludwig and gave a little wave, grinning cheerfully. "Hello! Er, sorry, I mean..." The man took a small book from his pocket, flipped to a front page, and shouted, "*BUON GIORNO*! Arthur, who are these people?"

Feliciano giggled while Arthur muttered an apology. "Alfred, for heaven's sake, they speak English. This is Feliciano and Lud... wig..." Arthur trailed off slowly, a look of realisation dawning on his face.

At that moment, a strange sort of stillness fell over the table. Alfred's smile faltered as he stared at Ludwig, unmoving, his eyes going wide and his cheeks turning pale. Feliciano glanced between Alfred's stunned expression, Arthur's bewildered face, and Ludwig's wide, unblinking eyes. It took a few moments before everything fell into place in Feliciano's mind. Alfred, an American fighter pilot who fought here during the war... Arthur, an Englishman with big, bushy eyebrows… *If it was him, I'd take on the whole German military single-handed...*

"Oh!" Feliciano's blood fired at the memory, and he could not hold back the loud outburst of understanding.

Heavy silence fell again until Ludwig spoke, steady and deliberate. "Pleased to meet you, Alfred."

Alfred looked from Ludwig to Feliciano, then gave a short disbelieving laugh. His blond hair was streaked with grey, and he certainly filled out his uniform more than he once had - especially around the middle - but Feliciano could see that same cheerful American pilot from all those years ago. The American who had led him to Ludwig; the American whose life Ludwig had saved in return. Alfred's look of disbelief turned to joy, and he fell into the chair beside Arthur, grinning brightly. "It sure is a pleasure to meet you folks! And it'd sure be swell to speak to some locals, rather than these stuffy military types trying to drag me everywhere. Excusi, waiter, *BUON GIORNO*! Coffee, *per favore*... COF - FEE!"

They quickly broke into cheerful, light-hearted conversation, though Feliciano and Alfred carried most of it. There was no need to speak of the past; no need to explain. They all understood, and that was enough. Feliciano gave Alfred help with his Italian pronunciation, and spoke about his and Ludwig's excitement for the upcoming FIFA World Cup, which was to be held in Germany this year. Arthur told them about London, with its busy streets and cricket grounds and little music clubs. Alfred and Ludwig spoke for a long time about the new fourth generation jet fighters, which Feliciano did not really understand very well. Feliciano learnt that Arthur owned a pub, that Alfred was a military flight instructor, and that they travelled often between America and England.

"But America is very far from England isn't it?" asked Feliciano, fascinated by all he learnt about these strange, faraway countries. He and Ludwig had never been able to travel further than Germany. America almost seemed like another planet.

"Ten hours or so to fly commercially," replied Arthur, stirring more sugar into his tea. "Although I almost prefer the days of the ocean liners. At least then I did not have to deal with Alfred racing to the cockpit and trying to convince the pilots to let him fly the bloody plane."

"The American pilots let me," Alfred muttered. "Damn British airlines and your stupid '*rules*.'"

"We often visit New York in the summer," Arthur continued, easily ignoring Alfred.

"New York, wow! We go to Germany in the summer, don't we Ludwig, because it is not so cold then. Sometimes we stop in Vienna on the way home."

"Oh?" Arthur was very polite, Feliciano noticed, even if he did sometimes kick Alfred's foot under the table. "Aren't Francis and Matthew in Vienna now, Alfred?"

"Apparently. Damn fine excuse for Matt to leave me doing this ceremony alone." Alfred snorted as he leant back in his seat. "Francis and Matt are friends of ours," he explained. "I'm pretty sure they've travelled everywhere by now."

Feliciano wondered if Alfred was speaking of his fellow pilot Matthew Williams, the nice Canadian with the little polar bear. "Have they been to the moon?"

Ludwig sighed almost inaudibly. "Feliciano, I've told you, just because one man went to the moon doesn't mean everyone can go."

"The military asked me to go to the moon," said Alfred proudly.

Arthur touched his forehead briefly. "Alfred, I've told you, they were being sarcastic, and it wasn't a compliment."

"Me and Ludwig watched the moon landing on the television in the village, but my brother Lovino says it didn't really happen, he says they faked it."

That immediately got Alfred's attention. Arthur groaned as Alfred sat up eagerly. "No, no, they went to the moon, but it was a distraction."

"A distraction?" asked Feliciano, instantly intrigued. "From what?"

"Mars," Alfred replied, his eyes fixed and intense.

Feliciano was confused and fascinated all at once. "Why Mars?"

Alfred leant forward on the table and gestured decisively as he answered. "Aliens."

Feliciano gasped breathlessly. "Of course!"

Ludwig and Arthur exchanged a resigned look of mutual understanding.

Another round of coffee and eventually the crowded cantina started to thin, everyone filtering away to the thronging square. "It looks like the ceremony will be starting soon," said Arthur, discreetly squeezing Alfred's arm. "We should probably be going."

Alfred looked reluctant, but he shrugged, sighed, and pushed back his chair. "Unfortunately, duty calls."

Feliciano felt a little sad to see them go. He couldn't help wondering if he would see them again. "What happens at the ceremony?"

Alfred took a moment to answer, and glanced briefly at Ludwig before he did. "Well, I get to stand up there smiling and looking proud while someone shakes my hand and thanks me and probably gives me another medal."

Feliciano wondered why Alfred looked so uncomfortable as he said it. "Well, that sounds nice!"

Alfred's smile looked a little forced, and Arthur quickly changed the subject. "If you're ever in London, please look up a pub called the Emerald Lion. We'd be delighted to see you."

"The Emerald Lion – that sounds pretty! Do you actually have a lion?"

Arthur laughed softly, and again he exchanged a strangely sympathetic glance with Ludwig. "No, but we have frogs in the back garden."

Alfred winked at Ludwig. "They ain't poisonous, though." Ludwig almost laughed at that. Alfred stood, held his hand out to Ludwig, and Feliciano noticed for the first time that it was missing two fingers. "It's been good to meet you folks." Alfred waited, still and expectant, until eventually Arthur spoke very quietly.

"Alfred."

Ludwig very briefly looked down at his chair, then back up at Alfred. With a sudden gasp of realisation, Alfred clenched his hand into a fist and looked away, his expression painfully shocked and almost angry. He shook his head, closed his eyes, and swore under his breath. But Ludwig spoke quickly. "I am grateful to have met you again, Lieutenant – or is it Captain, now? And I am glad to see that you are happy and well – the same as I."

It was the first time all afternoon anyone had acknowledged the fact they had met before. Feliciano hadn't ever thought he would see the American pilot again, and he certainly never expected to meet the Englishman whose photograph Alfred had shown him all those years ago. In some way it felt freeing, to see that they were living a happy life together; it felt like a resolution. Ludwig's sacrifice had not been in vain.

Alfred smiled reflectively, glancing between Feliciano and Ludwig. He still looked a little sad, but there was a relieved sort of joy in his face. He nodded, took a step closer, and again offered his hand, this time so Ludwig could reach it. "You deserve to be standing up there today, Lieutenant. You're the real hero."

Ludwig simply shook Alfred's hand firmly. "Good luck at the ceremony."

When Alfred turned towards him, Feliciano felt his chest fill with old familiar emotion and gratitude. Thirty years ago this man had told Feliciano of Ludwig's location in an American base. Consequences aside, it was still the most startling, selfless thing a stranger had ever done for Feliciano. Instead of shaking his hand, Feliciano pulled Alfred into a bruising hug. At the same time Arthur took Ludwig's hand in a handshake, holding it for a few moments with an intense, unfathomable look in his eyes. Finally he spoke one word, his voice breaking slightly. "Thank you."

Ludwig nodded at Arthur while Alfred laughed cheerfully, patting Feliciano on the back. Feliciano waved as they finally parted ways, Arthur and Alfred pressing through the crowd into the square. *"Auf wiedersehen,"* he called brightly.

Arthur turned back and smiled. "We'll meet again."

Later, as Feliciano pushed Ludwig's chair past the town square, they were greeted by the strains of a familiar song being sung by the crowd.

Una mattina mi son svegliato, o bella, ciao, bella, ciao, bella, ciao, ciao, ciao! Una mattina mi son svegliato, e ho trovato l'invasor.

Feliciano came to a slow stop at the back of the massing crowd, looking through the sea of Italian and American flags. The new stone monument had been unveiled in the square, to honour the American air crews who had liberated the town. It stood beside the older memorial, the one inscribed with names of murdered Italian resistance members. Alfred stood at the front of the singing crowd, a row of shiny medals on his chest, while several official looking men in suits stood beside him and a local villager prepared a big microphone on a tall stand. Feliciano could just see Arthur off to the side watching. Alfred stood waiting to be hailed as a hero; Ludwig sat at the back, unnoticed. But the four of them knew: the four of them understood.

Feliciano and Ludwig watched the ceremony for a few minutes, as an Italian official began talking about the heroes of the resistance and the sacrifices of the town and everyone's gratitude for the American military's defeat of the occupying German forces. As the man spoke, a fleeting memory ran through Feliciano's mind: of that moment thirty years ago he had almost witnessed the execution of two resistance members in this very square. He remembered Grandpa Roma's unfaltering determination to fight for a free Italy; he remembered the torment and years of pain Antonio had gone through after his interrogation by the Gestapo. Then Feliciano touched Ludwig's shoulder. He had been a member of that occupying German military, yet without him Alfred would not be standing on that podium today. Feliciano wondered if anyone in the crowd had any idea how complicated the entire situation actually was. There was no black and white when it came to war: no good guys and bad guys like there were in storybooks.

Feliciano looked again at Alfred with his medals and the admiration of the crowd. "Ludwig, do you have shiny medals like that?"

Ludwig took a moment to respond. "I once had many, Feliciano. But fighting for your country is not always the same as fighting for what's right."

Feliciano understood that, but still found it hard to accept. Ludwig was good, and noble, and all those years ago as a German officer, he had only ever tried to do the right thing. But Ludwig was on the losing side, so he would never be a hero.

They turned and headed out of the square, leaving the ceremony behind them; through the village and out into the countryside. The quiet of the country air was a relief after the heat and noise of the village square. Buildings had sprung up around the town in recent years, and it always seemed that the country road was growing shorter. But further out in the fields it

was still quiet and empty: the tall grass rustling gently, the familiar scents of flowers and herbs drifting on the wind. They walked in silence, Ludwig allowing Feliciano to push his chair over the narrow dusty road; Feliciano stopping briefly by the completely overgrown old tank to pick a sprig of wild rosemary from its side.

The old field had not changed in years, though there was now a track long worn through the grass towards the oak tree. As Feliciano slowly pushed Ludwig's chair along the track, that old familiar feeling enveloped him. This same easy peace, this same tranquil stillness, like they were the only people in the world; like they were somewhere else. Although it took a little longer to reach the oak tree now, and Feliciano's knees creaked as they stopped, and it took him a little longer to sit down on the grass. He sat beside Ludwig's chair, leaning his head against Ludwig's knees and playing with the sprig of rosemary. "I will place this at the memorial. When there is not such a big crowd."

Ludwig ran his hand through Feliciano's hair. "*Rosmarino*, for remembrance."

Feliciano did not usually like to remember those days, even though they were imprinted on his memory, and Ludwig's also. Their life was more now than those few days when it began. Their life was sunny afternoons in the Italian fields, taking all day to walk to the town or to just watch the clouds. It was mornings in their little garden, gathering herbs and flowers to sell at the market. It was long, warm summers in Germany, though they had to take the train to Munich since that big wall was built in Berlin. Feliciano supposed that by some people's measure of success he had not achieved much in his life. He could not write great symphonies like Roderich, or great books like Lovino. He was never a national hero like Grandpa Roma or Antonio. He could not even work in the fields like Grandpa Roma used to, not with the pain in his chest. But he could love. He could spend his days with Ludwig, and look after him, and that was all he wanted. That made Feliciano's life important.

"What will we do tomorrow, Ludwig?"

"We could go for a drive out to the vineyards. If you promise to remember you are not on a racing track."

Feliciano laughed. "My driving is just fine, Ludwig."

"Yes. For a racing car driver."

Feliciano ignored that. "The vineyards would be nice. We can get some wine for when Lovino returns. Can you believe he is going to play his guitar in Vienna? And Roderich said his orchestra would play our song! There is even a famous soprano going to sing it, but I can't remember her name..."

Ludwig brushed Feliciano's cheek with a cold hand. "I would much prefer to hear you sing it, Feliciano."

Feliciano smiled up at him. No, he did not often think of those days, but sometimes it was important to remember. It was now thirty years since they found each other. Thirty years, and this could have been any moment they had spent together. Because these feelings never

changed. So Feliciano sang to remember, twirling the rosemary between his fingers, as the wind shook the leaves overhead and the sun started to descend in the sky.

But Feliciano did not sing the last line. He just hummed the melody, feeling Ludwig's hand through his hair, his strong, steady warmth behind him. Yes, sometimes it was important to remember. But there was no need to ever sing that last line again.

Auf wiedersehen, sweetheart.

THE END

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